THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

MAGAZINE

APRIL 50¢ PDC

NAPOLEON SOLO ★ ILLYA KURYAKIN

Men were dying soundlessly on city streets. And while a world wondered and despaired, Solo and Illya battle *THRUSH*'s newest terrible weapon of destruction—

THE UNSPEAKABLE AFFAIR

A NEW Complete Novel of Extraordinary Power

THE UNSPEAKABLE AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Mute, powerless to speak or write, they gasped and were no more—the gallant men who had unmasked Thrush's most diabolical plot—and who now must carry their incredibly grim secret to the grave!

ACT 1

IN THE BEGINNING WAS SILENCE

THE MAN was tall and slender. He staggered as he walked, half ran, down the East Side street toward the river. His head turned every few yards to look behind him.

There was no fear in his eyes, only concern, worry, an anxiety that made him break into a full run as he neared the first street corner.

The street he ran on was in the East Fifties of New York. A dark night, with a wind; the street lamps cast only feeble circles of light.

For all his haste and anxiety, the man was clearly trained to danger. When he looked behind, it was not under the street lights but between them, in the darker areas, where he could have seen anyone following him as the follower was revealed by the light.

There was no one behind the running man, and he turned into a street of small brownstones that stood silent and innocent between a three-story whitestone building and a public garage. He passed the three-story white building, a faint smile on his face. His goal in sight, his guard down for an

instant, he did not glance at the three men in full evening dress who came out of the whitestone building as he ran past.

The three men swayed as if drunk, laughing, their voices slurred in the night. The running man barely glanced at them, and ran on. The instant he was past them, the three men in full dress ceased to sway. Their laughter vanished; their voices spoke to each other sharp and crisp.

"Now!" the tallest one cried.

The sharp hiss of his voice was matched the next instant by three piercing spitting sounds. Three, and no more. One short, harsh *puh-puh-puh* from each gun that had appeared in the hand of each dress-suited man.

Puh-puh-puh!

The running man seemed to leap forward, his feet off the ground, hurtling. His head jerked back, his arms flung out, and he sailed through the air of the dark street like some horrible, grotesque bird.

He seemed to hang there in the cold air for a long minute, flung up and forward, suspended on air. Then he sprawled face down on the hard concrete.

He did not move for a moment. Then, slowly, impossibly, he began to crawl. Three holes in his back, blood drenching the silent street, the man crawled. Slowly, painfully, like some crushed insect that still weakly moved its legs.

The three men in dress suits watched. Their pistols were still in their hands, the long, ugly silencers pointed at the crawling man. One spoke.

"Stubborn, these U.N.C.L.E. fools," the tallest man said. "They can't even die simply. Dimitri!"

The heaviest of the three nodded, stepped forward to where the man was still trying to crawl toward the steps down to a small shop with the sign, *Del*

Floria's Cleaners & Tailors. He walked slowly, letting the wounded man crawl. He raised his pistol again.

The shot never came.

From a doorway at the top of the brownstone stoop above *Del Floria's* another man materialized. This man, too, held a pistol, a strange-looking weapon.

He was a slender man of medium height with neat, dark brown hair. He looked like a young executive, a rising young doctor, perhaps an athletic playboy still young enough to be in good condition. He wore a conservative business suit, and looked like a thousand bright young men of business in the great city. He was none of these things.

His name was Napoleon Solo, and he shot the heavy man in the dress suit.

Puh!

A single spitting sound even fainter than the three shots earlier from the silenced pistols.

The heavy man was not knocked down; there was no blood. The dress-suited killer merely looked once at Solo, tried to raise his gun, and slid to the concrete.

Solo moved down the steps and out into the street with catlike speed. Incongruously, an easy smile played across his almost handsome face.

"Your guns, gentlemen, if you please," Solo said, smiling at the two remaining men in dress suits.

The two men raised their guns, fired wildly. Solo dove for cover. His pistol was up and aimed. The two men turned to run.

Directly in front of them, in the middle of the dark city street, there was now still another man. This man was small, slender, his Slavic face crowned by an unruly thatch of blond hair cut like the round-bowl haircut of some

ancient knight-errant. His bright eyes were shrewd beneath a habitually lowered brow as he watched the three men in the dress suits.

He seemed to have risen from the concrete itself, come up out of the earth. He watched the surprised killers with a quizzical expression.

"I think you should do as the man said," Illya Kuryakin said. "It's polite, you know."

The two men recovered from their shock, raised their pistols, and the blond man, Illya, shot them both.

Puh. . . puh!

They slid to the ground.

Illya did not look at them again. The small blond agent of U.N.C.L.E. walked quickly over them to where Napoleon Solo was already bending over the man they had shot. This man had stopped crawling. Solo had turned him over, and he lay now on his back with his eyes closed. Illya looked down at the shot man.

"He's alive," Solo said. "But he won't be."

"Diaz," Illya said, speaking down to the man. "Diaz, can you talk? Why—"

The wounded man, Fernando Diaz, agent for U.N.C.L.E. Section II, New York, opened his eyes. He stared up, dying, at the face of his Chief Enforcement Agent, Napoleon Solo. His lips moved, his tongue moved.

But no sound came.

"Diaz?" Solo said softly. "Speak slowly."

The man opened his mouth again. Strained, eyes bulging, the cords on his neck thick with effort.

There was no sound from his open mouth.

Not a groan, not a word, not a whisper...

Diaz fell back, breathed irregularly. Then his hand began to move. Illya reached into his pocket. The blond agent took out a small notebook and a pencil. He handed them to Diaz. The fallen agent barely nodded, took the pencil and notebook.

The pencil drew lines on the paper, circles. Diaz blinked, looked up. Solo showed him the paper with the meaningless scrawls. Diaz tried again. On the paper there was nothing but lines and small circles.

Diaz dropped the pencil, dropped the notebook. He choked, blood welling up in his throat. His eyes dilated, showed for one instant a small fear. Then he raised his hand. Finger extended, he pointed at the sky. His hand moved in the dark air, fluttered like a bird. He smiled and died.

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin stood there for some minutes, looking down at the dead man. Then they holstered their guns and bent to pick him up. They carried him into Del Floria's cleaning shop, into a rear dressing room, and through the wall into the clean, hospital-like corridors of the headquarters of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.

Behind them other men had appeared to carry in the three fallen killers.

TWO

THE ALARMS had stopped now in the bright, windowless corridors of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters. Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin, Chief and Number 2 man in U.N.C.L.E. Section II—Operations and Enforcement in New York, hurried in grim silence along the vaultlike corridors, past the closed and silent doors.

In its silence and anonymous efficiency, the complex of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, as impregnable as a fortress, could have been anywhere on earth or a thousand miles underground. Here there was no evidence of the

city outside, or of the innocent seeming brownstones on the street. There was no evidence from inside of the four known entrances, nor of the tunnels out to the East River, one of which Illya Kuryakin had used to make his seemingly miraculous appearance in the street through an ordinary manhole.

There is a fifth entrance to U.N.C.L.E. in New York, but that is known only to the man Illya and Solo were hurrying to meet now. The last door in the corridor opened automatically, the two agents having been thoroughly scanned and identified electronically, and they passed through into the office of Alexander Waverly, the only Western Hemisphere member of Section-I, Policy and Operations, and their chief.

Waverly, one of only five Section-I members in the world-wide operations of U.N.C.L.E., was not a man who stood on formality. An aristocratic, tweedy, unsmiling and slow-speaking man with iron-grey hair, Waverly was matter-of-fact and given to absent-mindedness on small matters.

"Mr.—uh—Solo, Kuryakin,"

Waverly said, blinking as he remembered the names of his two best agents. "Sit down. I trust you have examined Diaz?"

Solo and Illya sat down at the circular revolving table and faced their superior. Waverly began to look for a match to light the pipe in his mouth. As the bushy-browed chief searched his pockets for the matches, he continued to speak in his unruffled manner.

"The three men you quieted with your sleep darts have revealed nothing, I fear. Typical Thrush agents, of course—no fingerprints, no identification."

"How about using our super-pentathol on them," Solo said.

Waverly nodded, finding his matches. "We'll try it, of course, but I think with little result. They appear to be the usual Thrush assassins. No knowledge of any operations, and with no reasons given to them for their particular job. These three are so low they did not even have the remote-destruct charge under their skins."

"But they killed Diaz," Illya said grimly.

"Yes," Waverly said, "they killed Diaz. Most unfortunate. Did you find anything on his body that would help us learn why?" Waverly was not callous or inhuman. Diaz had been a good agent and a good man, but the work of U.N.C.L.E. in battling the cruelty and evil of the world did not allow its leaders the luxury of sentiment or even compassion. All U.N.C.L.E. agents knew the risk, and took that risk in full knowledge. They did not expect tears, only the continuance of the work they died for.

"Nothing," Solo said. "And they had no time to search him, so he had to be bringing a verbal message."

Waverly nodded, lighted his pipe now, and puffed slowly. Illya and Solo looked at each other. They had come to the important point. Waverly opened the subject that was now on all of their minds.

"He could neither speak nor write?" Waverly said.

"Not a sound, and not a letter on paper," Illya said. "He tried. It was almost frightening to watch him."

"He couldn't make a sound with his voice, but he could hold the pencil," Solo said. "He just couldn't write words."

"I simply don't understand it," Illya said. "He seemed to be in perfect possession of all his other faculties. There must be an explanation."

Waverly said, "What does the laboratory show?"

Solo shrugged. "A blank. No discoverable reason for it at all. The bullets were perfectly normal. No trace of a drug."

Illya leaned forward across the circular table. "There was no reason they could find, not in a complete autopsy. But Diaz could neither speak nor write."

Waverly nodded. A thoughtful expression crossed his craggy, bloodhoundlike face. The Section-I leader puffed on his pipe, allowing the

smoke to rise slowly to the ceiling of the sunny room that could have been the office of any slightly over-age college professor, except for the banks of electronic equipment that kept Waverly in instant touch with his own headquarters, and with the world.

"Therefore, we must look elsewhere, I should say," Waverly

said simply. "I expect we will find our reason for this, shall we say, 'unspeakable' affair, when we learn what Diaz knew."

"And just how do we do that?" Solo asked.

Waverly looked unsmiling at his chief agent. "That I believe will be up to you, Mr.—Solo. Yes, I think this is a task for your particular talents. You will take over Diaz's work immediately."

"Someday I'll learn not to ask questions," Solo said.

"Perhaps there will be a beautiful lady to compensate for the apparently short life span, Napoleon," Illya said, and smiled.

"One lives in hope, my fine Russian friend," Solo retorted.

Waverly coughed. "I don't imagine there will be much opportunity for your well-known hobby, Mr. Solo. Beautiful women are notoriously scarce on rocket bases, I hear. Especially on secret bases."

"Montana?" Solo and Illya said together.

"Yes, Montana. The Elk River Project. Diaz was going there from New Mexico ten days ago. We had a report to that effect from him. Apparently he arrived, checked into the nearest motel, and then vanished. His appearance on our street was a complete surprise to me."

"Why did he go to Elk River?" Solo asked.

Waverly puffed on his pipe. "It seems there are two rocket pilots here, test pilots for United States experimental rocket aircraft, who have fallen ill of a

strange malady. A secret report went to Washington, and Washington saw fit to call in. Wisely, I think."

"A malady?" Solo said.

"Apparently," Waverly said.

Illya leaned forward. The Slavic face of the small Russian was intense with excitement.

"They can neither speak nor write," Illya said. "Is that the malady?"

Waverly sighed. "I'm afraid it is. Diaz is the third case of unspeaking, not the first."

THREE

NAPOLEON SOLO whistled soundlessly, his boyish face showing neither fear nor caution, but only a certain surprise. Illya hunched forward and watched Waverly.

"Washington was disturbed, naturally," Waverly said. "They will be a bit more disturbed when they learn that their malady appears to involve our old adversary Thrush."

"And Diaz was working on the malady of unspeaking?" Illya said.

"No, not precisely," Waverly said..

"But you said—" Solo began to protest.

Waverly blew smoke. "I said, Mr. Solo, that Diaz had gone to

Elk River from New Mexico. His actual assignment was something quite different. You have heard of UFOs, of course? Unidentified flying objects?"

"Who hasn't?" Solo said. "Half the crackpots in the world have seen them, and the other half have ridden in them to Venus."

"Only a very small percentage are actually unidentified after investigation," Illya said.

"Approximately one percent, to be precise," Waverly said.

"Small enough to be explained by simple chance, lack of accurate information," Illya said.

Waverly nodded. "I quite agree. But what would you say to ten percent?"

"Ten percent?" Illya said, his eyes narrowing.

"Exactly," Waverly said. "The percentage has suddenly risen in the last six months. Of all reported sightings, some ten percent have not yet been explained."

"That's statistically impossible," Illya cried, "unless—"

"Yes, Mr. Kuryakin?" Waverly said, unsmiling.

"Unless we are being invaded from outer space," Illya said.

Waverly rubbed his chin. "We can't rule that out. It could very well be such an invasion, I'm afraid."

There was a long silence in the sunny office. Illya and Solo looked at each other. Both their faces registered sheer disbelief. Waverly seemed to have forgotten them for the moment. The U.N.C.L.E. leader was lost in thought. It was Napoleon Solo who spoke first.

"You really can't be serious, Chief?"

Waverly blinked. "What? Oh, yes, Mr. Solo, I fear I am. We are dealing with true unidentified objects, which means they could be from anywhere."

"Just how many is ten percent?" Solo asked.

"Four, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "There have been forty reported sightings all over the world in the last six months."

"Do we know what they were like, the four unidentified objects flying around?" Illya said.

"As it happens, we do," Waverly said. "Long and quite thin. They appeared to be painted black, unlike most such sightings, which are invariably silver colored. They also glowed, as if red- hot, and moved with incredible speed. Fast enough so that no one could get a really good look at them."

Illya was puzzled. "You make it sound as if all four were identical."

"They were," Waverly said. "Absolutely identical. And at least two were seen by extremely reliable people." Waverly looked at his two agents. "You can see why we are rather concerned. They seem a trifle too real."

"Is there any pattern, any correlation about where they were seen?" Solo said.

"Yes, a very simple pattern—all four were seen over New Mexico, near Santa Maestre, a small town at the edge of the Navaho Reservation."

Both Illya and Napoleon Solo studied Mr. Waverly as if certain that their chief was playing some kind of joke on them. When Waverly did not blink or change his serious expression, the two agents looked at each other again.

"I see you've grasped the significance," Waverly said dryly. "That was why we sent Diaz to New Mexico to investigate. He had little luck. That he reported. But when we called him about the two rocket pilots who were unable to speak, he seemed really excited."

"He thought there was a connection?" Solo said.

"He did, and so do I," Waverly said. "Both of the sick men are rocket pilots. The connection would appear obvious. I think Diaz believed they were faking the inability to speak, but he had no chance to report, obviously. So I am afraid it is now up to you gentlemen."

Solo grinned. "It's my job to go to Elk River, find out what Diaz learned and how he lost his speech, and try not to lose mine."

"I should say that would be approximately correct," Waverly said dryly.

You don't want me to accompany Napoleon?" Illya said.

"No, Mr. Kuryakin."

Illya sighed. "Which means that it is New Mexico for me, and l hate the heat."

Waverly was unsympathetic. "We all must make our sacrifices, Mr. Kuryakin. I suggest you both arm yourselves well, seeing what happened to Mr. Diaz, and we'll set up a relay so that you can keep in touch with each other. And one more thing, Mr. Kuryakin.

"I suggest you begin your search it a village called Noche Triste, on the Navaho Reservation. It seems hey had a mysterious explosion a mile from the village. Large hole in the ground, considerable noise, and a very high radiation count."

"Nuclear radiation?" Solo said.

"Very," Waverly said. "The Navaho medicine man attributed it to the indigestion of some god. But I think that an unlikely explanation."

"I tend to agree with you, sir," Illya said.

The two agents left their chief staring into space, already concerned with some other problem that had been placed in the hands of U.N.C.L.E.

They dressed and armed themselves. Solo dressed in a well-cut suit; he would go to Elk River as Mr. Roger Raille of the United States State Department, a cover already prepared by Washington.

Illya wore old clothes. Black, fit for hot work in the deserts of New Mexico. Both carried small briefcases, Illya's containing a specially sensitive miniature Geiger counter, which fitted his role as a uranium prospector.

Their jets left at the same time from Idlewild, but they slipped out of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters separately. It was a sensible precaution.

FOUR

NAPOLEON SOLO saw the two men run for a car that pulled out into the night traffic and followed Illya's taxi down the East Side street. He ducked into a doorway and took out the thin ballpoint pen that was not a pen at all but a miniature radio sender-receiver. The latest U.N.C.L.E. communications improvement, he held it to his lips and whispered.

"Bubba! This is Sonny. Mayday. Over. Repeat, Mayday."

The new instrument, developed by Section-IV, had an increased range of ten miles over the old sets. Almost instantly, the voice of Illya answered.

"Sonny, Bubba here."

Solo leaned over the tiny instrument. His eyes watched the dark street as he talked.

"Bandits on your trail. Two bandits in a black Mercedes. License begins with XB 12, three other digits I missed."

There was a silence. Solo listened intently in his hidden doorway. Then Illya's cool voice came over the radio again.

"I have them, just behind me, three cars back. Thanks, Napoleon."

"Be careful," Solo said into the tiny pencil set.

"Have no fear, and be careful yourself. I rather doubt our friends came alone."

"Roger," Solo said. "Meet at the BOAC information booth. They'll think we're going abroad."

"Right and out. I see my friends gaining on me."

In his dark doorway, Napoleon Solo replaced his radio-pen in his suit pocket. His keen eyes scanned the empty street. Illya was undoubtedly correct. If they had two men waiting to trail Illya, they had probably not neglected him. The difference was that he was warned.

He studied the dark street intently, noting every detail. He knew every car, every face, every shadow that moved or lurked on the street. One car, an old Cadillac, caught his eye. He did not remember seeing the Cadillac before on the street. It appeared empty and innocent. But Solo saw something else that made him smile to himself.

On the steps of the brownstone near the old Cadillac he saw a man and a woman. They appeared to be lovers dallying innocently with each other on the steps, with eyes and thoughts only for each other. Even as he watched they embraced, and he realized that they could see him clearly in his doorway.

They were putting on an act because they saw him watching them—and there was only one way they could have seen him where he was hidden in the dark shadows of the doorway. Infra-red glasses, or the infra-red scope-sights of a Thrush rifle! He flattened back against the wall.

But no shot came. Either he was wanted alive, or else they were not ready to shoot.

Solo smiled. He would have to see that they did not get another chance. And if they wanted him alive, then he wanted them alive. He peered out, carefully. They were still playing the lovers, the man and woman across the street on the steps.

He stepped out of his shelter and hurried away down the dark street.

At the corner he glanced back, so quickly no one could have seen him.

The Cadillac was moving along behind him.

Still smiling, he sprinted along the wide avenue he had turned into. The Cadillac came around the corner behind him, speeded up. He ran across another cross street until he reached a shabby tavern on the avenue. The Cadillac was close now.

Solo let it come very close, watching it out of the corner of his eye. Then, as if seeing the Cadillac and panicking, he looked wildly around, and dashed into the seedy tavern.

Inside the tavern the six or seven dilapidated customers at the long bar did not even look up. They held their drinks in both hands, stared into the depths of the whisky or at their own faces in the mirror behind the bar. They were long past caring about anything that moved, cared only for the small glasses of golden liquid in front of them.

Solo dashed through the long, dirty room with its gaudy signs that advertised the various beers and whiskies, and no one noticed—except the bartender and two drunks sitting in a booth near the door.

The bartender turned and touched a key on the cash register. Then the bartender reached under the bar and his hidden hand held a strange-looking pistol that was a twin of the pistol in Solo's Berns-Martin shoulder holster.

The two drunks in the booth near the door did not change noticeably, but one of them staggered to his feet and lurched across to the bar. He leaned there, asking drunkenly for a drink. The eyes of both drunks seemed lost in some bleary dream world. They were not. They were alert, watchful, and now there was one flanking each side of the door.

Solo went through the room without a glance at anyone, turned once to look back as if in fear. Then he vanished into the men's room. In the men's room he stepped to a section of wall and pulled a hook that was fixed on the wall for hanging clothes.

The wall opened, the mechanism activated by the bartender touching the cash register key out front. Solo stepped through. The door closed

automatically, locked.

Solo stood in a small room that contained a table and two chairs, a rack of weapons for emergencies, and a small television set. Solo switched on the television. Instantly he saw a view of the street in front of the shabby-looking tavern. The Cadillac was nowhere in sight, but a shadowy figure stood only a few feet from the door.

Solo smiled. The missing Cadillac was what he had expected. He pressed a button on the television set and another picture appeared. Now it was the side street, where the alley behind the bar came out.

Another shadowy figure stood there, watching the mouth of the alley.

He switched to the third camera. The Cadillac was parked in the dark of the next avenue behind the tavern. Somewhere they had picked up a third or even fourth man, probably hidden on the floor of the Cadillac all the time.

They had covered all exits.

Solo grinned to himself in the hidden room. That anyone trailing an agent would have the sense to cover all exits was precisely what U.N.C.L E. expected and planned for. This room, one of the many escape routes involved in perpetual Plan 9, was designed to enable an agent to evade any shadower.

The routes, the locations, were changed every few days, of course. Tomorrow this would be only a tavern again.

Solo switched back to the camera that covered the front entrance. The shadowy figure out there suddenly moved, came into the light from the tavern windows. A woman who held a small, deadly pistol—a woman Solo knew only too well. Maxine Trent!

A Maxine Trent returned from the dead—but Solo had never believed that the high-ranking Thrush agent was dead. Maxine was too deadly to die easily. Maxine was no low-rated assassin. U.N.C.L.E. could use her alive,

and now she was walking into the trap. He quickly switched to the other cameras—they were all closing in on the tavern.

He pressed a tiny button on the table. The warning light would flash out front where the bartender could see it. The rest was in the hands of Section-V, Security and Personnel. His own orders were standard and strict—the job came first; he had to make his escape.

In the hidden room he stepped to a closet, opened it, went in, closed the door and pressed the switch. The closet began to move downward, a small elevator that stopped at the sub-basement level. The door opened and Solo stood in a narrow tunnel.

Minutes later he was four blocks away, out in the night, hailing a taxi.

FIVE

ILLYA KURYAKIN leaned forward in his taxi and spoke softly to the driver.

"I think we are being followed, driver. I suggest you attempt to lose them. It is me they want, but they would be reluctant to leave a witness alive, I'm afraid."

The driver, a small man, cast a frightened glance behind him at Illya. The small Russian smiled his most reassuring smile. The driver saw the pistol in the agent's hand and his eyes bulged. Then the driver faced front, watched his mirror, and began to weave in and out of the airport-bound traffic.

After ten minutes, Illya saw that it was no use. The taxi driver was not trained in evading pursuit. He, Illya, would have to resort to more direct methods. And he would have to pick his own ground, not their ground. He leaned forward again.

"At the next street make a left, driver. Drive as fast as you can. We will be on a side street and they will close in."

The driver nodded, made the sharp left, barely missing an oncoming car, and drove fast down the darker side street. Illya looked behind. The black Mercedes was already behind them and gaining.

Illya narrowed his eyes and made a rapid mental estimate. He nodded; they would reach the area of open swamps that bordered Jamaica Bay before the Mercedes could catch them.

It would be close, but that was just what the blond agent wanted. Close, but not too close. He clicked his pistol on to bullets, and bent to his small suitcase. He came up with two tiny round pellets. Then he waited.

The taxi reached the deserted area of marsh and reeds and dark black water. The road had become a dirt road. The Mercedes raced closer behind.

"When I give the signal, slow down. When I'm out, drive away as fast as you can. Go to this address, and you will be well paid. Report what happened."

The driver nodded and took the piece of paper Illya gave him with the address of Del Floria's cleaning shop on it. The taxi drove on into the depths of the marshy shore. The houses were far behind now; to the left and right deep, wide channels of black water led in from the open bay.

The Mercedes was less than fifty yards behind and coming fast.

Illya leaned out the window and tossed both small round pellets onto the road behind the taxi. Two dense clouds of white smoke erupted in the night. In an instant the Mercedes vanished from sight behind the clouds of smoke that merged and covered the road.

"Now!" Illya hissed.

The driver braked, skidded, slowed. Illya opened the door and jumped out. He hit, fell, rolled, and came up on his feet with his U.N.C.L.E. special in

one hand and the small suitcase in the other. The taxi roared off into the night.

Illya crouched at the side of the road, his U.N.C.L.E. special ready and pointed at the cloud of smoke. The Mercedes should come through any second, burst out of the smoke, eager, unaware, and partly blinded.

The Mercedes did not come.

Illya waited, watched.

The Mercedes did not come. There was no more sound of its powerful engine.

Illya waited no longer. The trick had not worked. He did not hesitate another second. He turned and ran away from the road toward the marshes and the black channel of foul water that led in from the bay.

He moved not a second too soon.

As he ran, a man came through the smoke, his strange rifle held ready, its infra-red scope bulky above the barrel. A second man came from around the right side of the dissipating smoke cloud.

Both men wore grotesque gas masks, the large round eyepieces making them look like monsters risen from the swampy land itself.

The third man appeared almost directly in Illya's path around the left side of the thinning smoke. This man also wore a gas mask and carried the ugly Thrush rifle.

The two men Napoleon Solo had seen, and a driver.

Illya and the Thrush killer saw each other at the same instant. Illya was quicker. He fired a single shot. The Thrush agent sprawled backwards in the mud and lay still. Behind Illya, the other two Thrush men began to run toward him. They fired as they came.

Illya raced away across the marsh, his feet sinking to the ankles, his face slashed by the tall reeds. He found a narrow ditch, half-filled with water, and jumped into it. Behind him the two Thrush men closed in. He raised his U.N.C.L.E. special and laid down a withering fire.

The two Thrush agents vanished.

Illya crouched low in the ditch and waited again. His keen eyes glanced carefully around. The ditch stretched straight in both directions and he was surrounded by the tall, dry reeds. They could not come on him by surprise through the ditch, and if they came through the reeds he would hear.

But they had no intention of moving in.

First he heard the crackling, like the snapping of many small sticks.

Then he smelled the smoke. The flames licked upward in the night. They had set the reeds afire. Instantly, with some chemical—a favorite weapon of Thrush.

Illya tested the wind. It blew not strong but directly toward him. He stood. The now high wall of flame, roaring toward him with incredible speed as the dry reeds burned, hid him from the two killers. He looked all around.

They had set the fire well, probably with bombs. There was no escape right or left.

Behind him was the deep black water of the channel from the sea.

He could swim it with ease, but he would be a perfect target when the fire burned out, and that would be within minutes. He had no time to think of any plan but one.

He bent to his small suitcase, jerked it open, and pulled out a small, flat package.

The flames rose higher in the night. The heat was intense, growing hotter.

He tore open the small package and unfolded a long thin sheetlike cloth cover. He crouched down in the water at the bottom of the ditch, and covered himself with the thin, shining cloth. The ends of the cloth dipped into the water. Under it, his head above the surface of water in the small space beneath the cloth where there was air, he waited.

The sound of the fire roared in his ears. The thin cover blew in the wind made by the intense heat. He held it down and crouched, the heat stifling, like an oven. He could see the shadows of the flames above through the thin cloth—sheets of flame that leaped across the narrow ditch, roasting, charring everything in their path.

But the special fire-proof and heat-proof cloth did not fail. Slowly, above him, the flames vanished, passed on. Wind died, the crackling stopped.

Quickly he threw off the cloth and flattened up against the wall of the small ditch. They would not be far behind their fire. Already the flames were almost gone, burned out at the edge of the black channel of water.

Footsteps coming steadily.

They reached the ditch and looked down, looked for his dead and charred body.

Illya shot them both before they could speak a single word.

They tumbled into the ditch.

In the distance he heard the sirens approaching. Someone had reported the fire. He jumped from the ditch and ran back to the road. The Mercedes stood abandoned on the road. He ran to it. The keys were still there. He jumped in and drove off toward Idlewild.

The fire engines and police cars were in sight, but he had no time to waste. Thrush was very anxious that no one reach New Mexico or Elk River.

* * *

IN FRONT of the shabby tavern on the avenue near U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, Maxine Trent studied the entrance. Her men at the side and rear reported that no one had left the tavern. And yet she knew Solo would not have waited this long. Her beautiful face was thoughtful. She reached into her handbag and took out a compact. She pressed a button on the compact.

"Trent ordering. Make your attack."

She clicked off her transmitter and slid back into the shadows of the avenue. She waited. A minute passed, two minutes. Then there were four shots. And silence. The shots had come from the alley behind the tavern. She clocked on her transmitter compact.

"Trent ordering. Report!"

She waited. There was no response. Inside the shabby tavern all was quiet, normal. She began to smile. A trap, of course. One of good old U.N.C.L.E.'s Plan 9 fronts. She turned quickly and walked away down the avenue. She glanced behind her and saw the bartender of the seedy tavern standing out in front.

She smiled again, laughed a harsh, cold laugh. Well, two men lost, but you had to break eggs to make an omelet. They had been lousy men anyway. And she had located an U.N.C.L.E. front, not that it would still be there tomorrow. But it caused U.N.C.L.E. trouble, and that was both her job and a pleasure.

Solo would not trap her so easily any more. She had many a score to settle with the handsome U.N.C.L.E. agent. It was unfortunate that he was what he was; she rather liked him, he was so very handsome and virile.

Maxine sighed. It would have been so good to have him make love to her. It was really too bad he would have to die sooner or later.

She continued to walk, smiling at the way she had guessed the trap. She had missed Solo again, but one had to lose some battles. It was the war that counted, and she would win the war. She was quite sure of that. She, and

Thrush, would win because U.N.C.L.E., for all its skill and power, still worked with principles of right and wrong, and for Thrush only victory was right. Right and wrong did not exist, only winners and losers, and Maxine was going to be a winner.

She found a drugstore open and stepped into the telephone booth.

"Yes?" a deep, cold voice said.

"Number four, Row sixteen, Circle three and come in on forty-two," Maxine said crisply.

"Your report, Agent four sixteen dash three forty-two. Name?" the deep voice said from the other end of the line.

"Trent, Maxine."

"Proceed, Agent Trent," the deep voice said.

SIX

THE ROOM did not exist. The building was on Park Avenue in the upper Sixties, a modern office complex of steel and glass where giants of industry sat in their suites and conducted the business of the nation. In this suite, there were six rooms, only five visible, only five listed on the floor plan. The sixth room did not exist.

Windowless, without doors, soundproof, and ventilated only by a secret, totally impregnable, air-conditioning system, the room was the silent home of a machine. A complex of metal and wheels and flashing lights—The Ultimate

Computer, the heart of Thrush. One of the homes of the machine, it remained in no single place for long.

Now, in the room with the machine, in a silence of a tomb, three men sat waiting. Soon a fourth man appeared as if by magic through the wall. This fourth man walked to an empty seat.

"Trent reports Napoleon Solo escaped her," the man said. "Our men sent after Illya Kuryakin have also failed. Both Solo and Kuryakin were seen meeting at the BOAC booth at Idlewild."

"They are not going overseas," the man at the head of the table said. This man was a well-known businessman, and the suite of offices nestled around the hidden room was his. He was also "C" of the Council of Thrush.

"No," a tall, gaunt man said. "They are not going overseas. What does the computer say?"

The fourth man, the one who had entered last, and who was Council Member C's assistant, spoke deferentially to the tall, gaunt man.

"The computer reports, Council Member L, that on the basis of Diaz's death Alexander Waverly will connect Elk River and New Mexico. It says, further, that Waverly will not guess the exact nature of the New Mexico project until he learns more details of the explosion. "

There was a hollow laugh from a small, fat man who was the last man in this hidden room. "Do we need a machine to tell us those things? I am surprised."

"The machine makes us certain, Dr. Guerre," the tall, gaunt Council Member L said. "Go on with your report."

"The computer says that Waverly will send Solo to Elk River, and Kuryakin to New Mexico. Our field agents have already been alerted. The computer further says that Solo cannot discover what he wants at Elk River, but that Kuryakin might discover the New Mexico operation."

"Good," Council Member C said. "Then we must concentrate on the death of Kuryakin at once. Solo can wait."

"Kill them both at once," Dr. Guerre, the small, fat man said. "That is the only safe way. The devil with your computer! I must have no interference. I am in the crucial stage of the project at the island. I must get back, and I want them dead!"

"They will die, Dr. Guerre, but it is efficient to kill the more dangerous first," Council Member C said.

"The devil with your efficiency!" Guerre roared. For such a small man, his voice had the power of a giant. "Diaz almost fooled you and ruined the whole work, the most important work we have ever done! With Operation Condor we will have all the world begging to be ruled by us!"

Council Member C smiled. "Almost, Doctor, but not quite. He fooled our people at Elk River, but he did not fool the computer."

"Luck! Even your computer would have been too late if Diaz had not been unaware of the side effects of the stabilizer drug! How did he worm his way into our confidence?"

"That error has been eliminated. Dr. Guerre."

"I hope so. Those men will be out of the side effects today; we must be sure they are reliable. I must get back to the island."

Council Member C smiled. "They could not betray us and live if they wanted to."

"Then let us hope they do not want to betray us," Dr. Guerre said. "We need them. In Condor, the men are almost as important as the machines."

The gaunt Council Member L looked coldly at Dr. Guerre. "I have guaranteed that Thrush Council will give you complete security and material, I guarantee success. Do not insult me with your doubts. But I agree on one point: we must get back. I will be missed."

"Then I suggest we start work," Council Member C said.

The tall man bristled. "You suggest? You? May I remind you that this is my project, Council Member?"

"Of course. Council Member. I merely meant my part., the defeat of U.N.C.L.E. here in the American phase."

"Very well," the tall Council Member L said. "As long as it is understood that Condor is my project."

T here was a low chuckle. They all turned to look at the small, fat Dr. Guerre. His benign, almost jolly, face beamed around the silent and secret room.

"No, gentlemen, it is my project. Condor is mine, the child of *my* brain. Thrush may rule the world— I care nothing of that—but it will be my brain that brought it to pass!"

And the fat little man beamed like some rotund and too friendly small-town businessman.

A round little cherub smiling innocently at the stern faces around him.

ACT II

WHIZZ-BANG IN THE NIGHT

NAPOLEON SOLO presented his credentials at the reception desk of the Elk River Project. The pretty young receptionist checked his identity picture against his face. She saw a boyishly handsome young man with a small black mustache and horn-rimmed glasses.

The boyish face smiled at her. It was not an innocent smile. The pretty receptionist blushed and passed him on.

Solo grinned to himself and looked back. The girl, who had been watching him walk away, blushed again. Solo filed her face, and the name on her desk, Miss Rogers, for possible future reference. Perhaps this would not be quite as dull an assignment as Alexander Waverly had suggested.

Still thinking about the possibilities of the nubile Miss Rogers, Solo entered the office of Elk River Security Officer Max Smart. The security officer was a husky six-footer, and he was not pleased to see Solo. Smart had been expecting the U.N.C.L.E. agent, but he did not know who Solo was, or that he was Solo. Smart thought he was talking to Roger Raille, representative of the State Department.

"Damned if I know what State wants here, Raille," the husky security officer said. "But you might as well sit down."

"Thank you," Solo said.

Smart chewed on a cold cigar. "I mean, damn it, we've got a smooth operation here, strictly Space and Pentagon. I don't like other departments poking in."

"I just follow orders, Mr. Smart," Solo said.

"Meaning that I should do that, too?"

"It seems a reasonable suggestion," Solo said.

"Don't get too wise with me, Raille," Smart snapped.

Solo smiled. "The State Department never gets wise, Mr. Smart. "

"Major, Raille! Major Smart to you," the security officer said. Smart chewed on his soggy cigar. "I might as well get it over and get rid of you. You want to know about Caslow and Wozlak, right?"

"Right," Solo said.

Smart swiveled in his chair. "Okay, here it is. Captain Caslow and Lieutenant Commander Wozlak are two of our test pilots, experimental

rocket craft, and that's all you get to know. Top secret. About two weeks ago they came down with this illness. They couldn't talk, make any sound, and they couldn't write. The docs were baffled, and that's it."

Major Smart looked at Solo as if he was more than pleased to be able to tell him so little. Solo sighed inside. The problems of inter-service rivalry had caused him trouble before. Sometimes it seemed that professional servicemen spent a lot more time trying to beat their rivals instead of the enemy.

"The doctors had no bright ideas?" Solo asked.

"Some," Smart said. "Some effect of cosmic radiation, possibly. Perhaps an effect of the high speed, much faster than any other craft ever flew. Glandular disturbances affecting that area of the brain. Some combination of, say, radiation that high up plus the speed. They had a hundred guesses."

"With, I gather, no results?" Solo said.

"Not so as you could notice," Smart said.

"Any ideas of your own?"

The major shook his head. "No, except that we just don't know everything that can happen at high speed up that high. Anyway, they're okay now, so no sweat."

Solo narrowed his sharp eyes. "They're well again? They can talk, write?"

"Good as new," Smart said. "They go back to work in a week."

"I think I better talk to them," Solo said.

"I've told you all there is."

"Orders, remember?" Solo said. The security officer glared at Solo. The U.N.C.L.E. agent smiled benignly. Finally, Major Smart shrugged, sighed, and pressed a button on his desk. A white-helmeted MP appeared.

"Take Mr. Raille to the infirmary. He's to talk with Caslow and Wozlak. Ten minutes, no more. See to it, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir," the MP sergeant said. And to Solo, "This way, sir."

Solo nodded to Major Smart. "It's been fun."

The Security Officer only glared at him. Solo grinned as he followed the MP sergeant. They went down bright corridors until they reached the door marked *Infirmary*. Solo was taken by a white-coated Army doctor into the private room of Caslow and Wozlak.

"Amazing timing," the doctor said as he ushered Solo into the private room. "Absolutely no explanation that we could find. Oh, we know it was something that affected only that particular part of the brain—the speech and language part—but we can't get a clue as to why. "

But Solo was not listening to the doctor. He was looking at the two men who sat on their separate beds, their eyes on him. They were dressed in the usual Army hospital bathrobes, but it was not their dress that made him look at them so hard. It was their eyes—they were wary, a little afraid of him.

The doctor introduced them, and Solo waited until he left the room. Then he turned to the two men.

"What can you tell me?" Solo said.

Wozlak shrugged. "Nothing. All we know is that we woke up about two weeks ago and we couldn't speak or write, not even our names. Last night it went away. You tell me."

"You must have some idea," Solo insisted. "Something that happened that was unusual."

"Not a clue," Caslow said. "Nothing happened at all."

They were lying. Solo sensed this. He could not say just why he knew it, or what the lie was, but he felt that they were lying.

"Nothing at all unusual happened?"

"No," they said in unison.

"What do you know about a man named Diaz?" Solo snapped.

It was Caslow who blinked. Solo watched him. There was no doubt, the name had meant something to Caslow. Wozlak covered for both of them.

"Diaz? Nothing, I don't know any Diaz. And that's all we can tell you, Mr. Raille."

"I see," Solo said. "You're sure about that?"

"We're sure," Wozlak said.

Solo nodded. "All right, I'll just have to report a blank to the State Department."

He was sure Wozlak smiled. "I guess you will. Anyway, it's over now. We're okay."

"Nice and safe," Solo said. Wozlak nodded as he looked straight at Napoleon Solo. Caslow licked his lips. The Army man was nervous. But Wozlak did not flinch.

"Safe as we can be," Wozlak said.

Outside in the corridor, Solo stopped to think. The MP sergeant was down at the end of the corridor, talking to a pretty nurse. Solo was about to go and remind the sergeant of his duty, when he heard the noise.

He snapped alert.

A low, hissing sound.

Without moving, or showing that he had heard it, he let his eyes search the bare corridor for the sound.

It came again, "*Psssst!*"

Just behind him Solo saw a door open a crack. His hand stole under his jacket for his U.N.C.L.E. special. There was a face at the small opening in the door.

"*Psssst!* In here!"

The voice whispered low. Solo glanced down the corridor. The MP was still in deep conversation with the pretty nurse. The rest of the corridor was empty. His hand on his pistol, Solo stepped to the door and entered.

He stood in a small storeroom. The voice that had hissed at him belonged to a woman. A girl— really, a very pretty girl. He had momentary hopes that it was him she wanted, for himself. But the girl had something else on her mind.

"You're not from the State Department," the girl said.

Solo clicked off the safety on his Special. The girl was quite young and very pretty. She wore a white smock, and her hair was dark red. Her green eyes were staring up at him.

"Why do you say that?" Solo asked.

"I know you have a gun under your coat, and you don't act like a State Department man," the girl said. "Besides, you asked questions about Diaz. I'm Penny Parsons—Penelope, but I hate the name."

"And just what do you do here, Penny?"

"In the lab, research assistant. I'm terribly bright, you know. Magna cum laude from Cal Tech."

"Good for you," Solo said. "Now what about Diaz?"

"He vanished. I don't know why, but I do know he was working on a case for someone. He asked me a lot of questions," the girl said.

"Why you?"

"I'm Mark Caslow's girl, or I was," Penny said. "It was a secret. The powers around here don't like romance among the minions."

"What did you tell Diaz?" Solo said slowly.

"That they are lying," Penny Parsons said eagerly. "Mark and that Wozlak are lying in their teeth. A lot has been happening that's not usual. On half their flights they stay away hours too long. They always report that they had some troubles with the new engines up there, but Mark got drunk one night and let it slip. They've been landing somewhere. In New Mexico, I think."

"New Mexico?"

"They can fly there in minutes," Penny said.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Off and on since they got back from vacation six months ago."

Solo released his hold on his pistol in the holster under his coat. "Vacation? They went on vacation six months ago?"

"And they were overdue on their test flights by four hours the day they turned up unspeaking!"

"Where did they take their vacations?"

The girl looked around, whispered. "In Santa Fe. At least they said it was Santa Fe, but they weren't there! I went to surprise Mark. I never told him. They checked into a motel at Santa Fe, but then they vanished."

Solo closed the door of the storeroom. He stepped closer to the girl. Her eyes were bright and eager as she began to whisper her whole story again.

TWO

ILLYA HAD almost reached Noche Triste when the car had the flat lire. He had landed at Santa Fe and hired the car at once. He told the car-rental people he was looking for uranium, and he drove out toward the Navaho Reservation, and the flat tire was actually a blowout. He fought the skid of the car to a halt.

He stood beside the car on the deserted highway. As far as he could see in the hot sun there was nothing but barren sandhills and cactus. A dry and desolate country fit only for lizards. He looked down at the blown tire. Then he went to the trunk to get his tools and the spare. The blowout would hold him up at least fifteen minutes.

He saw the cause of the blow-out. A large two-by-four studded with nails was lying on the highway.

Illya took his tools and spare tire from the trunk, setting to work on his blown tire, but his eyes beneath his lowered brow searched the countryside near the road. The two-by-four could be an accident, or it could be a trap. The board was at least six feet long, studded with nails all around. Nothing could have passed over it without a blowout, yet his car was the only stalled vehicle.

It could have been dropped, accidentally, of course, only a short time ago, and traffic was light on this highway. Not another car had passed since the blowout. But it could also have been placed in the road purposely to stop him. He was still puzzling this out, and working on his tire, when it happened.

At first it was only a low rumble, a rumble and a whine, distant and off to the north.

Illya glanced up. There was a line of low brown mountains off to the north. The sound was behind them, growing louder. Growing rapidly louder.

Incredibly louder—a roar and a screaming whine—the road began to shake. His car began to shake: he felt the ground tremble.

A fantastic noise, roaring and whining, growing louder and louder.

Illya Kuryakin fell flat to the ground.

It appeared over the crest of the low brown mountains two miles away. The noise of its roar was impossible, it was so loud.

It flashed over.

Was gone.

Illya whirled to see it vanish, climbing high into the glazing hot blue sky.

Illya stood up and stared after it. A long black cylinder, with stubby wings and glowing a dull red. Without markings or identification of any kind.

He turned and stared out across the arid land to the line of low brown hills. It had come from behind there. And then, even as he watched, it appeared again. Miles away it went past at its incredible speed, vanished behind the low hills, and there was silence.

It had landed. Somewhere out there behind those hills. Illya completed changing his tire, put away his tools, and drove the car off the road. Then he stopped, gathered up his kit and the small suitcase, and started to walk out across the dry land toward the distant hills.

* * *

NAPOLEON SOLO faced the sweating Army man. Caslow looked from Solo to the eager face of Penny Parsons. The Army man looked past them both to the locked door as if hoping for help, for a miracle.

"You might as well tell us," Solo said. "Something happened on that last flight."

"No!" Caslow cried.

The trapped captain still looked toward the door as though he expected someone or something to come through its solid steel. With the help of Penny Parsons, in whom he had confided, Solo had managed to get Caslow alone, away from Wozlak. Now the Army captain sweated.

"You've been making flights to somewhere," Solo insisted. "After your vacation you started staying out too long on your test flights, both you and Wozlak."

"We've had trouble with the ships!"

"No one else has had that trouble. I've checked the flight reports," Solo said.

"So we got two bad ships!"

"Both of you? And then you coincidentally come down with a strange disease?"

Penny Parsons burst out. "Tell him, Mark! I know you're in some trouble. It's that Wozlak, he put you into trouble—I knew he would."

"Shut up, Penny!"

The Army man was deadly pale. "You've got to tell Mr. Solo. He can—" the girl began.

Caslow turned even whiter. "Mr.—who?"

"Solo," the agent said. "My real name is Napoleon Solo, and I work for the same people Diaz did."

"Diaz?" Caslow almost whispered. "No."

"You know what happened to him, don't you, Caslow?"

But Caslow did not seem to hear. He was staring into space.

"U.N.C.L.E.! You're with U.N.C.L.E.," Caslow whispered.

"Tell me what happened to Diaz, and what you're mixed up in! We know, Caslow. We'll find out what it is," Solo said.

"No more," Caslow whispered. "Don't ask any more!"

Penny Parsons insisted. "Please, Mark, tell Mr. Solo!"

"No more! You don't understand! No more!"

Solo leaned close to the sweating officer. His handsome face was grim as he stared into Caslow's eyes. His voice was low and insistent.

"We'll have to turn you over to the CIA. You realize that? You might as well tell us. If you don't I'll have to take you back to New York. We'll use pentathol, and—"

Complete terror filled the eyes of the Army man. He seemed to be in the grip of a titanic struggle. Then he went limp.

"All right," Caslow said. "I'll tell you what you want to know."

There was a small, sharp explosion. A tiny puff of smoke appeared over Caslow's heart. The army man screamed once and fell off his chair to the floor. There was blood. Penny Parsons stared in horror and then uttered a small cry.

Solo bent over the man. Caslow was dead. Solo opened the uniform coat, looked.

"Thrush. It's their trick," Solo said. "A lethal charge inserted under the skin over the heart. It must have been programmed into his blood pressure."

Penny Parsons stammered. "Blood pressure? Programmed?"

Solo nodded. "Probably works like a lie-detector. Set to explode when a change in blood pressure indicates a man under interrogation cracks, decides to talk. The blood pressure would show that. Typical Thrush tactics. I should have guessed."

"Who is Thrush?" Penny asked.

"It's better that you don't know, Penny," Solo said. He looked down at the dead Caslow. He felt sorry for the man, it was a hard way to go. Still, there was no doubt that Caslow and Wozlak were somehow involved with Thrush. "What you don't know can't get you to end up like this."

"But I do know," Penny said, "Don't I? I mean, I know about Mark and that awful Wozlak, and I know about you, and—"

"I get the point," Solo said. "All right. It's possible we could use you anyway. Let's go, before Major Smart gets smart and starts looking for Caslow. I don't think the major would care for our explanation of how Caslow died."

"Go? Go where?" the lab girl said.

"Why, New Mexico, of course. I imagine we'll find our friend Wozlak there somewhere," Solo said.

"But I can't get time off to—"

"That will be arranged, Penny," Solo said. "New Mexico is the next piece of the puzzle. I think we will find more than our friend Wozlak —a lot more."

THREE

THE LINE of low brown hills was farther away than Illya Kuryakin had imagined. All afternoon, through the blazing sun and heat of the barren New Mexico land, he had walked toward them. Land fit only to be given to the sad remnants of a proud people.

As he walked in the heat Illya wondered again at the hypocrisy of those who were shocked by Siberia but blind to the equal horror visited upon the Indians. At least, in Siberia, the condemned sometimes got their release.

It was night when Illya at last reached the line of low hills. Moving carefully, he made his way up in the dark of the desert night. He reached the crest without seeing or hearing anything. He crawled the last few feet and looked over and out.

He saw a long, narrow valley, dark and indistinct in the night. Apparently, it was barren and empty. And yet there was something odd. Nothing moved; there was no ray of light. Yet Illya had the feeling that something, someone, was down there. He opened his small suitcase and took out a pair of infra-red binoculars.

Through the glasses the details were clearer in the night. There was nothing he could put his finger on, but he still sensed that something was odd down there. He watched for some hours, but there was neither light nor movement anywhere in the long, narrow valley below. There seemed to be no defenses of any kind.

Could he be wrong? He remembered the nail-studded two-by-four on the highway. Had they set a trap to divert him, send him on a wild goose chase? It was possible, yet he did not think so. Somewhere down there was the strange black craft that flew so fast it glowed red.

At midnight, Illya Kuryakin decided there was nothing more he could do until dawn. He needed sleep. He found a small, but deep culvert on the other side of the hills, and crawled in. He checked all approaches, set out four tiny alarm cells so that no one could approach without warning, and then lay down to sleep because it would be a long day tomorrow and he needed all his strength.

* * *

IN THE telephone booth at the Elk River airport, Maxine Trent looked out through the glass sides at a twin-engine plane taxiing down the runway. The deep voice at the other end of the telephone line was concerned.

"Solo is leaving Elk River? Why? He could not have found anything, at least not so quickly. The computer said U.N.C.L.E. could learn nothing at all from Wozlak or Caslow."

"Did the computer know about the girl?" Maxine said into the black instrument, her eyes still following the small plane on the runway.

"Girl? What girl?"

"Caslow's girl friend, a Penny Parsons," Maxine said. "Now Caslow's dead, and Solo and the girl are flying out to New Mexico."

The deep voice swore. "Caslow's dead?"

"The programmed destruct device worked. He was about to talk," Maxine reported. "It seems he neglected to tell us that he had a girlfriend, and our agents failed to detect her."

"Someone will pay!" the deep voice snarled. "And Wozlak? What about him?"

"Escaped to New Mexico. With Solo on to Caslow, Wozlak was no more use here," Maxine said.

The voice cursed again. "Follow Napoleon Solo, alert our people at Noche Triste. The computer did not know about the girl."

"That's the trouble with machines," Maxine said. "They can't think."

"Let us see that you can, Agent Trent," the deep voice said. "Solo and the girl must be eliminated!"

"A pleasure," Maxine said, as she watched the small twin-engined plane take off.

Moments later she hung up and walked quickly to a second plane that waited on the runway.

* * *

ILLYA KURYAKIN awakened at the first light of dawn over the barren desert land of the Navaho Reservation. His hand on his U.N.C.L.E. special, he peered cautiously out of the culvert. There was nothing in sight. High up

a golden eagle soared looking for food. The giant bird sailed high and undisturbed. Illya left his culvert, retrieved his four tiny warning cells, and began to crawl up to where he could look down into the long valley.

Nothing had changed. The long, narrow valley between the brown hills was as empty as ever. Nothing but rocks and dry ground, cactus and stunted trees gasping for life in the arid land. And yet . . .

Illya trained his binoculars on the bottom of the valley. Something was very peculiar. He studied the hills, and the distant ends of the valley.

Then he started his binoculars at the tops of the hills across the valley and worked slowly down to the bottom.

And he saw it.

The contour was wrong! The valley was too shallow!

The natural fall of the land should have made the valley deeper, narrower at the bottom. Now, studying the terrain carefully and knowing what he looked for, Illya saw the places where boulders seemed to suddenly bend in the middle and become flat, where trees on the slopes of the hills were too short. Camouflage!

Almost perfect, it was. From the air it would have been totally impossible to see. Even as close as he was he could not be absolutely certain. The entire bottom of the long valley was camouflage, and beneath the false bottom—?

Carefully, carrying his equipment, Illya began to work his way down toward the bottom of the valley. It was hard going, steep, and he noticed, now that he was farther down the side of the hill, the wide perimeter of completely open space, a wide lane, just before the apparent bottom of the valley.

Illya studied the situation from beneath his lowered brow. The sun was coming up over the rim of the hills and there was not much time. He searched for a better approach route to the bottom of the valley. There seemed to be no way. He would have to chance crossing the open area.

He crouched very low in the dawn light and stepped out from behind a boulder to start across the cleared area. He took two steps and stopped again, crouched like a small animal in the dawn. His eyes stared at a tiny projection in the ground.

He looked left and right. Caught by the first slanting rays of sun, the tiny projections stood a quarter of an inch out of the ground in a long and endless row all the way in either direction.

Illya studied the tiny projections. Mines? He reached into his small suitcase, laid carefully on the hard earth, and brought out his small explosives detector. He placed it beside the miniature projection in front of him. The detector did not register. The projection was not a mine.

He returned the explosives detector to his suitcase, and took out the flat, miniature electronic activator. He set the miniaturized instrument on detect and placed it next in the projection. The dial registered immediately. The small metal projections were the sensors of an alarm system.

Smiling grimly to himself, Illya returned his equipment to the briefcase, and crawled slowly backward until he was again in the shelter of the boulder. He crouched again and studied the terrain right and left. He could risk crossing the open space, but he could not risk triggering an electronic alarm system. There had to be another way down.

Carrying his equipment, Illya began to circle the area slowly, keeping out of sight above the cleared sector. He moved quickly and silently. At last he found what he wanted.

A natural gully-like arroyo cut into the side of the mountain and led all the way to the bottom. There was cover from view all the way. There would be the electronic sensors, but out of sight he could move slowly enough to avoid them. He smiled his quizzical smile—no system was perfect.

He moved down the arroyo, his eyes on the ground. He stepped carefully and lightly, avoiding the electronic sensors that stuck up from the ground almost invisible. He had moved halfway down to where a yawning shadow

ahead showed where the space opened beneath the camouflage when he heard the noise.

He jumped.

His eyes on the yawning black opening ahead, aware of the alarm sensors, and yet hearing the noise of footsteps approaching, Illya leaped to a small boulder where there would be no sensors. On the boulder he saw an open space behind it, flat and smooth and hidden. He jumped down.

His feet struck—and sank.

In an instant he was up to his knees, halfway up to his waist from the force of his leap. His legs were under the smooth surface, held, immobile.

Quicksand.

Calmly, he laid his flat suitcase on the smooth surface and pressed against it to raise himself.

Nothing happened.

The suitcase pressed into the soft surface, but his legs did not budge. And slowly, very slowly, he was sinking. He tried to raise each leg separately. He could do nothing. He stopped struggling. The less he moved the slower he would sink. But he sank. Very slowly, almost imperceptibly, but he sank.

He heard a noise and looked up. A man stood on the rock above him. The man carried an ugly Thrush rifle.

The man stood there and looked down at him.

"Good morning, Mr. Kuryakin," the man said. "Are you comfortable?"

"Quite comfortable," Illya said.

"Good. Alas, I'm sorry you cannot swim in that sand, or stand either. Interesting material, quicksand. Too solid for swimming, too liquid for

walking. You will have much time to consider the error of your associations before you die."

Illya watched the man. If he could shoot the man now, the man's body could fall across the sand and give him a hold to pull out on. The man laughed.

"No, don't try to shoot me. You'd never move fast enough," the man said. "You're a rather small man. It should take about ten hours to sink all the way. I'll be back for the final inch."

And the man was gone.

In the quicksand, helpless and sinking so slowly, Illya remained icily calm. Movement would only sink him faster. He knew now that it was all a trap. The entire security set-up had been designed to force him into the arroyo and, finally, into the quicksand. And he had followed the path like a stupid mule.

But there was no time to waste on his own stupidity. They had him, and there was only one way out. He opened the small suitcase and took out his pencil radio sender-receiver. He clocked it on.

"Sonny, this is Bubba. Red alert! I need help! Sonny? Come in, Sonny."

There was silence. The blazing sun was up above the edge of the arroyo now. As Illya Kuryakin slowly sank, the sun burned like a red-hot flame against his bare head. He continued to talk into his miniature radio as he slowly sank deeper and deeper.

Even with the distance relay, there was no answer from the silent radio. Illya breathed deeply, the quicksand up to his waist now.

"Sonny, this is Bubba, come in! Red alert!"

FOUR

NAPOLEON SOLO led Penny Parsons from the small plane at the Santa Fe airport. He looked up toward the other small aircraft that was now circling the field. Solo grinned. They were after him, but they were also telling him that he was getting warm.

"What is that annoying noise?" Penny said.

The pretty young scientist was staring at Solo. The noise was coming from his suit-coat pocket.

"What are you, wired for sound?" Penny said.

Solo took out his radio and clicked it on.

"Sonny? Relay from Bubba. Acknowledge."

Solo bent to the instrument. "Sonny here, relay Bubba."

Illya's voice came on. A calm voice, yet Solo could hear the tension in the voice of his fellow agent and best friend. Illya was in deep double. Solo looked around. No one seemed to be watching.

"Go ahead, Illya," Solo said. The voice of the small, blond agent had a faint edge.

"I seem to be in a rather sticky situation, Napoleon," Illya's voice said. "Literally, I fear. Where are you?"

"Santa Fe," Solo said. "What's the trouble?"

"Quicksand. About chest high by now. They led me into it very nicely."

"How long do you have?"

"Perhaps four hours, even five. You say you're in Santa Fe?"

"Yes. Where are you?"

"A few miles from Noche Triste," Illya said calmly. "That's about two hundred miles from you."

"I'll get a helicopter," Solo said. Penny Parsons was staring at the sight of Solo bent over a shiny pencil and talking. The other small plane had landed and was taxiing up. Solo watched it from the corner of his eye. Two men had appeared in the Santa Fe Airport building. They were looking at him and the girl.

"No," Illya said. "One look at a helicopter and they would undoubtedly come back and do the job more quickly. You'll have to drive."

"It'll be close," Solo said. "I think I have company."

There was a silence from the other end, the distant spot where

Illya stood up to his chest and sinking in the blazing sun.

"We'll have to chance it, and come carefully."

"Roger, right now," Solo said.

"And Napoleon," Illya's voice said. "Bring a rope."

There was no more time. The two men were walking toward Solo and Penny Parsons. Solo clicked off his set. The other small plane was halted, and Solo saw the woman emerge. He smiled. Good old Maxine. He gripped the girl's arm. Penny stared at him.

"Now do just as I tell you," Solo whispered. "We're going on a drive, but first we have to get rid of some unwelcome friends."

"But I—" the girl began.

"Just do what I do," Solo said. Suddenly, his hand on the girl's arm, he began to walk toward the exit. The two men speeded up to cut him off. Behind him, Maxine and another man were in the door out to the field itself. Quickly, Solo doubled back and dragged Penny toward the baggage exit. The two men whirled to follow.

In the doorway to the field, Maxine sent the man with her to block the baggage exit from outside. Solo doubled back again and headed for the restroom area, pulling the protesting girl after him. He was watching his pursuers carefully.

He doubled back toward the street door once more. As he pulled the girl on this last maneuver, Maxine and his two other pursuers came after him on courses that converged. He hurried closer to them until he saw that in a few more steps they would all be at the same spot.

He dropped the smoke bomb at the exact spot they hurried toward.

Thick white smoke billowed up. People began to scream. A wild chaos filled the air terminal building. Solo gripped the girl and dashed straight through the smoke, exactly where his pursuers were struggling to break out of the smoke cloud. Maxine was shouting.

"The other door! Quickly, you fools!"

Solo and Penny Parsons brushed right past them in the smoke and emerged on the other side just at the exit. Solo grinned. He pushed the girl ahead of him through the exit and out into the driveway area. A taxi stood at the taxi stand. Solo and Penny hurried toward it.

The fourth pursuer, the one sent to guard the baggage exit, came running toward the cab, his gun out, all caution gone now. Solo dropped him with a single shot from his special, a shot with a sleep dart. Puh! The man fell and skidded four feet. Solo pushed Penny into the cab and jumped in.

"The nearest car rental agency, driver," Solo said, his pistol still in his hand. "I would suggest speed."

The driver needed no further urging. Maxine Trent and her two henchmen were already coming out of the terminal building. Solo waved to them as the taxi drove away.

* * *

ILLYA KURYAKIN watched the sun going down behind the opposite rim of the valley. The quicksand was up to his armpits now, and in the last hour he had begun to sink faster. He had been in the sand over twelve hours, and all that had saved him was his suitcase.

Flat, the suitcase presented a wider surface to the sand. Not enough to pull out against, it sank much more slowly and by hanging onto it Illya had slowed his descent. But soon the sand would reach his shoulders, and then his chin, and then—

Moving as slowly as possible, using one hand, he raised the pencil adio to his lips again.

"Sonny this is Bubba. How much farther do you have?"

The voice of Solo came in. "About thirty miles, Illya. We're driving as fast as possible."

Illya did not answer. He was saving his strength. Each time his foot moved it sank another fraction of an inch. He kept hoping to find some bottom. But there was no bottom. Soon the sand was at his shoulder, then his chin would he readied, and then . . .

NAPOLEON SOLO saw the car off the highway in the last rays of the sun. It was Illya's car, there was no doubt. A typical Thrush mistake, to leave the car. Solo stopped the car and looked out toward the low line of brown hills. On foot he would never make it.

"Hang on, Penny," he said grimly.

The girl blanched. "You're not! Oh no, the car can't make it!"

"Let's see if perhaps it can," Solo said, and turned the car off the highway.

He drove in the purple desert twilight, bumping and lurching across the barren land. Illya had said there was a tall peak, flat on top, directly behind where he was. Solo could see it clearly ahead against the purple twilight sky.

* * *

THE SAND reached his shoulder, flowed up toward his chin. Illya clung to the flat suitcase that was under the surface of the sand now.

It was dark.

The last purple rays had gone behind the hills, and now Illya sank alone in the pitch dark. His light was in his case under the sand. He had long ago dropped his pistol, it was no use in this battle. Even his pencil radio was gone, slipped into the sand and vanished.

With no radio he had lost contact. There was no one now to talk to, to help him remain sane, to keep up his faint last hopes. Was this, then, the end?

To vanish under a surface that was neither sand nor water?

Gone, and no trace to show where he had gone?

* * *

THE CAR gave out at the base of the first hill, its axle finally breaking under the strain of the impossible drive. Solo leaped out, took his briefcase and the rope, and motioned to Penny Parsons to follow him.

Silently they climbed the low hills. He was directly behind the tall, flat-topped hill, but he could see nothing in the dark.

He put on his infra-red goggles, took the girl's hand, and climbed.

At the crest he looked down at the long valley. The small arroyo was off to the left. Sliding in the dry dirt, he went down toward the dark arroyo.

He could see nothing.

Then he saw the boulder Illya Kuryakin had described. He motioned to the girl to stay where she was, and moved cautiously toward the boulder. He kept his eyes on the ground, stepping over the electronic sensors. He reached the boulder and looked down.

A flat, smooth surface stretched in front of him like a pool of water in the darkness. Then he saw the black object.

"I would suggest speed, Napoleon," Illya said.

Solo smiled. The black object was Illya's head. The sand had just reached the small Russian's chin. As Solo watched, he saw the pale shape that was Illya's right hand.

"Here comes the rope," Solo said.

He tossed the rope. Illya caught it the first time, passed the loop over his hand and into the crook of his elbow. On the boulder Solo began to pull.

Nothing happened.

"The boulder," Illya said.

Solo stepped down carefully, and passed the rope around the boulder. Then he leaned all his weight against the rope end and dug his feet into the hard dirt.

The rope began to give. Solo dug in and struggled ahead, the rope over his shoulder. Suddenly it gave completely and Solo sprawled in the dirt. He jumped up and began pulling more easily.

"All right, enough," Illya called from the other side of the boulder. "I'm out; you'll drag me half over the landscape."

Solo stopped pulling and jumped up to the top of the boulder.

"Ingrate," Solo said, grinning.

Illya, on firm land, stood up and began to pick the thick quicksand from his clothes.

Then the two men moved cautiously back up the arroyo to where Penny Parsons waited. The girl looked nervously around in the dark night.

"Now can we go?" she asked.

"Not until dawn," Illya said. "Much too dangerous to try to go down there again at night."

"You're not going—" Penny began.

Illya shrugged. "Of course. I didn't come here for a swim in quicksand. We still have to find out what there is down there that goes whizz-bang in the night."

Solo handed Illya a spare U.N.C.L.E. special, and the two agents lay down to sleep and wait for the dawn. Penny Parsons sat on the ground and stared at them.

FIVE

MOVING CAUTIOUSLY in the first light of dawn, Illya and Solo reached the yawning black opening beneath the camouflage. They had left Penny securely hidden in a narrow culvert. Now they peered into the maw of the real valley floor beneath the camouflage.

The camouflage reached from one side of the valley to the other, some hundred yards, and rested on supports some fifty feet high. Its length was impossible to estimate—at least two miles along the entire valley floor.

Under the net there were low, flat buildings that almost reached the camouflage above. The buildings told them nothing, and there was no one in sight. Illya pointed to the ground.

"Napoleon, look!"

Solo looked at the ground. He whistled low.

The ground was not ground—it was a smooth cement road. A very wide road, with heavy black marks.

"A runway," Solo said.

"I think we have found where our unidentified flying objects come from," Illya said. He had already described the glowing black craft he had seen fly over him.

"But it's only two miles long, maybe even less."

"Enough with booster rockets," Illya said. "Still, it would take very well trained men to lift off just at the edge there from under the camouflage."

"That's probably why they need expert rocket pilots."

"What I saw flew even faster than a normal rocket," Illya said.

Solo rubbed his chin. "There was radiation around the hole of that explosion. One probably crashed."

"Nuclear propulsion!" Illya said. "And no one has managed to use it for aircraft before."

Solo looked around. "One thing puzzles me. I can see how they manage to take off, but how do they land?"

"Let's find out," Illya said.

The small, blond Russian led the way in a quick dash across the runway to the first low building. The two agents peered in at a window.

Inside the building a horde of black-clad men worked over a long, enormous engine. It was a strange affair, unlike anything Solo or Illya had ever seen.

The agents continued on, running crouched from building to building. Inside another building they saw slabs of black metal-like material glowing in a wind tunnel.

"Heat shield material. That explains the glow on the black plane," Illya said. "At that speed, most materials would melt. They seem to have developed everything."

The third building proved to be a personnel testing installation. Inside it men were seated in big pressure chambers; white-coated men worked over them. There were many glass bottles. As the two agents watched, injections of some pale blue substance were being administered to a group of men.

Then the three armed men came around the corner of the building.

"Quick!" Illya cried.

Solo and Illya ran to a door in the building. It was open. They dashed inside. At the door they listened. The footsteps were approaching the door.

"There," Solo whispered.

A metal door stood open to the left down a dark corridor. Illya and Solo ran for it, entered a large room with benches along the side, and slammed the door shut behind them. Outside in the corridor the footsteps came closer, passed, and faded away.

"Close," Illya said. "Did you see those men being injected, Napoleon?"

Solo nodded. "Yes, I did. I have a hunch that might explain our 'silent malady'. Some effect of a special drug."

"You noticed they were being injected before entering a pressure chamber. I also noticed a jet sled for speed effect testing," Illya said. He nodded soberly. "You know, Napoleon, that black ship I saw moved much faster than anything else I ever heard about. That much speed would have effects on a pilot. I wonder if they have developed a drug of some kind for that purpose, a drug which has side effects?"

"Could be," Solo said. "Let's get out of here and find out."

"An excellent suggestion," Illya said.

The small, blond agent walked in the metal door. He turned the handle, but it would not turn. Illya Kuryakin tried again. Solo watched him. The handle would not turn the fraction of an inch. Solo started toward the door to help.

Solo rose from the floor, floated in the air.

Illya, his hand on the handle of the door, was suddenly above the handle, floating, his body higher than his hand.

Solo floated up and crashed into the metal ceiling. The chief agent tried to force himself down with a lunge. He careened across the room, smashed against a metal wall.

Illya lost his grip on the door handle and tumbled through the air. The small agent cried out.

"Weightless! It's a weightlessness test chamber!"

"You're telling me!" Solo said, floating in the air, smashing against the floor on his back and bounding up.

"We can't handle it!" Illya cried.

"Try!" Solo said.

"It takes training," Illya said, fighting to remain upright in the air, unable to, falling over horizontally.

There was a noise, the sound of metal sliding. The two agents twisted in the air, saw that a metal panel had slid back to show a thick plate glass window. A man's face watched them from the other side of the window.

A fat, round face that smiled benignly at them like a small, pink cherub.

ACT III

ONE EGG IN A CONDOR'S NEST

THE STEEL WALLS of the room were windowless. The door was barred. Penny Parsons sat and was afraid.

"They found me an hour ago. I hoped that you—" she did not finish.

"We'll get you out, Penny," Solo said.

The barred door opened. A small, fat man entered with two silent guards dressed in black. The guards carried Thrush rifles. The small man had the fat, round face that had watched them through the window of the weightless test room. The fat man beamed at them.

"I doubt that you will, Mr. Solo," the fat man said, "but I must say I admire your ability and resourcefulness. You got so much farther than the computer said you would. I have little faith in thinking machines. A man is the true thinking machine."

"Meaning yourself?" Solo said.

The fat little man laughed. "Well, in all modesty, I think that you will find Dr. Ernesto Guerre listed among the geniuses, especially after this project is completed. I imagine Waverly has a fair dossier on me. Too bad it will not help you."

Illya studied the little man from where he sat. The quizzical eyes of the small Russian were interested.

"Dr. Ernesto Guerre," Illya said softly. "I remember. You worked for the Soviet once. Before that—"

"Before that for that fool Hitler, yes. They all did not believe I could do it, but I have done it. And with my brain, not with a computer! I warned them that Diaz was a bad mistake, but they trusted their Ultimate Computer."

"Diaz found out?" Illya said.

"He managed to get past our personnel check and play the part of a rocket pilot," Dr. Guerre said, and laughed. "Luckily, he did not know about the side effects of *metabala-G*. You were quite correct, Mr. Kuryakin, *metabala-G* is a little development of mine to enable pilots to stand the speeds of the Q-ninety-nine."

"It affects the speech and language section of the brain?" Illya said.

"It does. We are working on it. But, after all, pilots do not need speech," Guerre said.

"The Q-ninety-nine is a plane?" Solo said.

Guerre nodded. "Nuclear propulsion, speeds never dreamed of, unlimited range. They all said I was crazy."

"Maybe they're right," Solo said.

Guerre narrowed his small eyes, but the perpetual benign smile never left his fat face. "Thrush does not think so, Mr. Solo, and I will give them rule of the world! They are men of vision! Not like your soft world powers. With my work, Project Condor will give Thrush complete world domination!"

"Not with a few aircraft, no matter how fast," Illya said.

"No, but—" Dr. Guerre started to say, and stopped. The happy- looking little fat man laughed. "I think I have told you enough. I dislike men to die curious, but you know enough. Now I think we will find out what you know. Personally, I would just kill you. Very simple, a bullet in the head. But my Thrush friends want to pick your brains."

The fat little man turned and walked out through the door. His place was taken by a smiling Maxine Trent. The two guards had not moved. Maxine smiled at Solo.

"My poor Napoleon, caught again. I'm surprised at you, walking right in like this. I believe you could have escaped after you pulled Kuryakin out of the quicksand. Our man was very careless there. He's gone."

"Hello, Maxine," Solo said. "You never give up, do you?"

"For you, my dear Napoleon? Never. I really have a strong attachment to you. I wouldn't have anyone kill you except me."

"I'm touched," Solo said.

"Besides, I owe you something for that Australian affair. My superiors were most annoyed by that. I think I'll give them your brain on a platter."

"A modern Salome," Illya said dryly.

Maxine looked at the small Russian. Illya grinned at the Thrush agent.

"We won't neglect you, Kuryakin. Our Russian section is most interested in you," Maxine said. "However, I think we'll start with the girl. I want our men well warmed up by the time they get to Napoleon."

"She doesn't know anything," Solo said.

Maxine laughed. "Gallantry, Napoleon? How interesting. But I imagine Miss Parsons knows more than even she is aware of. Take her out!"

The command was given to the two black-garbed guards. They led the shivering Penny Parsons out of the room. With a mocking wave, Maxine followed the guards and the girl.

The room became silent.

"She doesn't know anything," Solo said.

"They'll kill her then," Illya said. "They won't believe her, she was with us."

"I thought she'd be safer."

"You were right as far as it went," Illya said. "After she talked to you, they would have gone after her anyway. The question now is, what can we do for her?"

"First we better get out of here," Solo said.

"I agree," Illya said. "I'll watch the door."

Illya went to stand at the small barred window in the door. Solo bent over and examined the cuff of his trousers. After a few moments he reached down and gently pulled a long thread out of the trousers. He laid it on the floor in front of him and turned to the other trouser leg. He pulled out another long thread. He laid this beside the first long thread.

Then Solo began to twist the two threads together. He twisted them carefully, leaving the last inch of each thread spread apart. He ended with a stiff, braided, stringlike filament about a foot long.

"There are no guards in the corridor," Illya said from the door. "I wonder why?"

"We'll probably find out," Solo said.

Solo was removing the buttons from his suit coat sleeve. He took the four buttons, and tied them together in pairs with a third thread from his trousers. He left an inch of each thread protruding from the button hole. Then he stood up and looked at Illya.

"Did they leave you anything?"

Illya shook his head. The search had been thorough and expert. Neither agent had been left even his shoes or his belt. Nothing but the clothes they stood in.

"Nothing," Illya said. "We're lucky they left you your clothes. Mine were ruined by the quicksand."

Solo handed Illya one set of buttons tied into the tiny pairs.

"This will have to do then," Solo said.

"Ready?" Illya said. "I don't like there being no guards outside. They feel secure."

"Well, maybe we can change that," Solo said, grinning.

Solo picked up the stiff, braided filament made from the two threads from his trousers and carried them to the door. He doubled the string over twice, and pressed it against the door exactly where the lock was on the outside. The string struck there with self-adhesive.

Then Solo touched the two separated ends, rubbed them lightly together, and jumped back.

There was a tiny flash of flame at the ends of the braided threads, and then a blindingly bright glow. The glow, white hot, lasted a full minute. When the glow faded, there was a gaping hole in the steel door six inches across where the lock had been.

The door swung open at a touch from Napoleon Solo.

TWO

THEY SAW a light at the far end of the long corridor. Solo led the way in the opposite direction. The corridor ended in a solid wall of rock. They retraced their steps toward the light at the other end. The walls of the corridor were smooth, unbroken rock.

"It must be a cave in the hillside," Illya said.

"Which explains no guards," Solo said. "Down there is the only way out. That's where the guards are."

The two agents reached the end of the corridor. They peered out and saw that the cave opened into a room. This room was also steel, and two armed guards sat in chairs at a desk. There were windows in this room with light coming through them from outside. The windows were barred.

The two guards were having an argument about the comparative merits of American and South American women. It was a heated discussion, and they did not hear the faint noise made by Solo and Illya as the two agents prepared the tiny buttons in their hands.

"Now," Illya hissed softly.

Both agents pinched the inch of thread that protruded from the buttons, and tossed the tiny pellets out into the room. The guards heard them, turned, their Thrush rifles raised and pointed. That was the last thing they ever did.

Illya and Solo dashed back into the corridor and fell flat.

Two shattering explosions ripped the steel room.

The guards screamed once and were hurled against the steel walls. The table in the room smashed into pieces. The chairs hurled into the air.

Illya and Solo leaped up and ran back into the room. They looked at the dead guards and at their weapons. Both rifles were twisted shards of metal.

There were no other guns in the room. The outside door, blown open by the explosions, hung crazily from shattered hinges.

"No time!" Illya cried. "We'll have to run for it! No weapons!"

Already voices were shouting somewhere.

"Let's go! " Solo cried.

The two agents ran out of the steel room and into the open area beneath the high camouflage. Alarm bells had begun to ring. Far off, near the building where they had been caught, they saw the tiny, fat figure of the cherubic Doctor Guerre. The little round man was bawling orders.

Black-suited guards ran all across the area beneath the camouflage.

In the distance there was a whine, incredibly high, and then the roaring of a motor. The roaring came closer. Illya pointed far down the runway.

A black craft, long, tubular and with stubby black wings, hurtled down the runway, a long tail of vapor jetting out behind.

At this instant, the agents were seen.

"Get them!"

From all sides the black-garbed guards converged toward Illya and Solo—from all sides but one.

No guards came at them across the runway where the nuclear-powered aircraft was hurtling forward.

"Quick!" Illya cried.

The small Russian led Napoleon Solo across the runway directly into the path of the onrushing nuclear craft. They crossed in front and fell to the ground.

The plane hurled past them.

The force of its passage picked them up and threw them across the runway like tumbleweed blown on a high desert wind. They held their heads in their arms, taking the bruising buffeting until they at last lay still.

Solo was up first, a deep gash on his face where a rock had cut.

"Let's move!" Solo cried.

Illya Kuryakin staggered up. The small Russian's ear was torn, his face bruised, but there was no time to assess damage. Black-suited guards were running across the runway through the cloud of dense vapor left by the nuclear craft that was now airborne.

"I'm right with you," Illya shouted.

The passage of the nuclear craft, and the dense cloud of vapor, had given them a head start and a clear field ahead. They ran.

When they reached the edge of the high camouflage, they ran on out into the sunlight and up the arroyo they had crept down earlier that morning. They did not move carefully now to avoid the electronic sensors.

Behind them more alarm bells began to ring as they kicked the sensors.

"The car is on the other side!" Solo shouted. "If we can reach it."

"If they've left it!" Illya shouted back. "I suggest we try to lose our friends first!"

The blazing earth burned their bare feet cruelly. Behind them the guards were still coming, threading their way up the arroyo.

Solo and Illya reached the crest and looked down. Solo's rented car was gone. The two agents crouched low and looked back. The guards were scrambling up behind them.

Solo went to work removing four more buttons from his suit coat. He tied them together with the last explosive threads from his trousers. The four buttons were the last tiny bombs.

He handed one small bomb to Illya.

They waited.

The black-suited guards came closer. They were bunched up, the guards, like amateurs. Far down at the foot of the arroyo, the fat figure of Dr. Guerre still shouted orders. The guards reached no more than forty feet from Illya and Solo.

"Now," Solo said once more.

The two agents stood, lobbed the tiny bombs stiff-armed, like hurling grenades. The two tiny pellets arched through the hot sunlight and fell into the bunched crowd of pursuing guards.

The explosions shook the arroyo.

Rocks hurled, and arms and legs fell mangled across the hot land. There was a silence. Then the groans began.

They lay all across the arid and sun-baked dirt. They groaned and screamed in their agony. None had been left untouched in the first bunched group, and farther down the arroyo the rest of the guards huddled out of range and stared up at the crest.

Behind them Dr. Guerre was swearing, urging them on. But the guards were wary now. Two men they had thought unarmed had proved to have sharp teeth after all.

It was then that the helicopter appeared.

Over the desert from the west, flying low and rising up over the crest of the hill. A hand waved down at Solo and Illya, then the helicopter roared on over and down the hill toward the packed guards.

A sub-machine gun began to chatter from the helicopter.

The guards stared. Two of them fell. The rest broke and ran. They ran down the hill, all the fight gone out of them by the unexpected danger they had found in two defenseless enemies.

At the foot of the arroyo Dr. Guerre rallied his men. Some of them began to take cover and fire at the helicopter. The helicopter came down on the fiat top on the crest of the hill. A man leaned out.

"Hurry!" the man called. "They'll get their guts back soon."

Illya and Solo needed no urging. They sprinted for the helicopter. Already Guerre had rallied his men down at the bottom of the arroyo. In a moment, they would be starting up again.

The two agents scrambled into the helicopter. At the bottom of the arroyo Dr. Guerre stood and watched it lift off. Inside, Solo armed himself and handed an U.N.C.L.E. special to Illya.

"How did you find us?" Solo said to the pilot.

"Waverly," the pilot said. "He had your radio transmissions monitored. When you didn't report in all day, he alerted us and sent us here."

"It's good to have a smart chief," Solo said.

"Where to? Santa Fe?" the pilot said.

"No, not Santa Fe," Illya said. "Back to the Thrush project after dark. As soon as it's dark, we have to go back. There's a girl there we have to help."

"Back?" the pilot said.

"Back," Solo said.

"Back," the pilot said. "After dark. Where now?"

"Just set it down near my car," Illya said.

They waited the few hours before the sun would set again over the baked land of the Navaho Reservation. Just before the sun was at the crest of the hills on its way down, as Illya and Solo checked their weapons, the roaring began.

An endless roaring sound like a thousand engines warming up.

Illya and Solo looked at each other.

The roaring seemed to shake the land. It came from behind the line of low hills, down where the camouflaged valley was.

"I think," Illya said, "we will be saved the trouble of going back."

The first black nuclear craft suddenly appeared in the sky, roared over, glowing red from the heat of its incredible speed, and was gone.

Six in all screamed over and vanished into the darkening sky.

The pilot looked toward the hills through his binoculars.

"Look!" he cried.

All across the hills tiny figures were fanning out. Through the binoculars they were seen to be unarmed and wearing, now, ordinary clothes. They moved quickly down the hills and out across the desert, going in all directions.

"I have a hunch," Illya said. "Let's get away from here."

The pilot started his motors and the helicopter took off into the purple and orange sunset sky. It turned toward Santa Fe.

Behind the helicopter the sky suddenly turned a glaring white, and the line of low hills exploded with one gigantic roar. The helicopter was buffeted by the force of the wind from the explosion.

"They blew it up," Solo said.

"Yes," Illya said. "And Penny with it."

"Unless they took her in one of the aircraft," Solo said.

"Let's hope they took her," Illya said.

Behind them as they flew on toward Santa Fe, the sky glowed a dull red as the hidden valley burned in the now dark night.

THREE

ALEXANDER WAVERLY filled his pipe and looked for a match. His bony fingers searched in the pockets of his tweed suit. Patched up and with a day of sleep behind them, Illya and Solo sat at the revolving table. Waverly found his matches.

"Ah, there," Waverly said. "Well, the Army reports your camouflaged valley is totally destroyed. No bodies were found, and the radiation count was high. I think it is clear that our friends have shifted operations."

"They knew we would bring help," Illya said.

"Quite," Waverly said. "They realized their game was up in New Mexico, and shifted."

"Which leaves us on a limb," Solo said. "They could have gone anywhere."

"*Er*, not quite, Mr. Solo," Waverly said.

"You have a lead," Illya said quickly.

Solo leaned. "If Penny is still alive we owe her—"

"Indeed we do," Waverly interrupted. "But let us start with Dr. Ernesto Guerre. We know a great deal of him, although little about his early life. He was born in Costa Rica, we know, but little else until he appeared in Nazi Germany during the war."

Waverly pressed a buzzer on his desk. The wall behind the desk opened, revealing a screen. A picture appeared on the screen. Dr. Ernesto Guerre smiled out at them from a group of men. All the men wore the field grey of the German Army. The cherubic little fat man seemed ridiculous in the military uniform.

"Colonel Ernest Guerre," the voice of May Heatherly intoned. Solo pictured the beautiful redheaded chief of Communications-Research, Section-IV, and sighed. May was so efficient.

"Guerre headed a secret project on nuclear development, but the Germans were too far behind at the time," the pretty girl's voice went on.

Waverly broke in. "Guerre was considered unstable even by the Nazis—a monomaniac, given to daring mental leaps but with a tendency to sloppy groundwork. The Soviet government found the same problems."

The next picture flashed on. It showed the tiny little fat man wearing a typical ill-fitting Russian suit and standing before a rocket on a launching pad.

"Dr. Guerre appeared in the Soviet Union after the war. He again headed up a secret project on nuclear propulsion. This time he supposedly got some results, but two engines exploded and killed many technicians and some high-ranking officials. The project was shelved and Guerre vanished," May Heatherly went on.

"But not quite," Waverly said.

Now a series of pictures flashed on and off the screen. They showed a man, in various disguises and places, who could have been the cherubic little Doctor. None of them was very clear.

"These were all taken in various South American cities over the past few years. None of them prove that Guerre is there, but taken with the rumors, I would say our man had been working somewhere in South America recently," Waverly said.

"Those guards!" Solo said. "They were talking about South American women."

Waverly tapped his pipe and nodded. "Precisely. That is another clue. But we can do better than that." '

Another picture flashed onto the screen. It was hazy and dark, but it showed what both Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo knew was one of the black nuclear- powered aircraft.

"This was just radioed to us from Venezuela," Waverly said. "It was taken last night near the coast. As you can see, the craft is moving more slowly

than you reported, and its wheels are down, hence a landing. It was radioed directly to us by our Section-II Chief in Caracas. It is top secret."

Solo was studying the picture. "Most of the background detail is indistinct."

"Yes, the exact location cannot be guessed," Waverly agreed.

"But surely the man who took the picture can tell us where he took it," Illya said.

"I'm sure he can," Waverly said. "But that we will have to learn in Venezuela. Or, rather, you two will have to learn it. You see, General Hoyos, the defense minister, insists that he will give the exact location to no one but our agents. He fears internal troubles if the news leaked out. He has instructed us not to tell even Washington."

Illya narrowed his eyes beneath his lowered brow. "Isn't that a bit unusual?"

"It is, but General Hoyos was adamant. As a matter of fact, he does not wish the Venezuelan government to officially appear in this at all. You will deal with his assistant. Major General Valera."

"I can understand that," Solo said. "It could hurt him at home if it got out that his office had allowed a foreign power to build nuclear-powered aircraft on Venezuelan soil."

"Precisely, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "At least, that appears to be the general's thinking on the matter. I'm not sure I agree, but he is insistent that we try to handle this as quietly as possible."

"What more does the general know?" Illya asked.

Waverly puffed on his pipe. "Should he know more?"

"I do not think that Project Condor, as Guerre called it, consists only of the nuclear-powered aircraft. That would not be like Thrush. When they develop a weapon, it is for a definite purpose. Nuclear-propulsion alone would not give Thrush world power, as Guerre implied Project Condor would," Illya said.

"Yes, I tend to agree with you," Waverly said. "But General Hoyos has told us nothing more if there is more to tell. If there is more, it seems that you and Mr. Solo will have to find it."

Solo nodded. "Anything else?"

"Yes, you are aware that the Thrush chief for the area is Council Member L. We know that much, although we have never managed to penetrate his cover. He is a clever man, as we have had reason to learn. Our organization in the country has never been strong, largely due to his efforts and constant harassment."

"Do we know anything about him?" Illya asked.

"Only that he is a very ambitious man with strong insistence on running his own show," Waverly said. "We have long suspected that he has hopes of moving to the top in Thrush, and this affair could be his stepping stone."

"And that's it?" Solo said.

"Except that his hobby is growing roses," Waverly said.

"I doubt that he will invite us to his gardens," Illya said.

"You never can tell," Waverly said. "I suggest that you be very careful, gentlemen."

* * *

AT A WINDOW high above the city of Caracas, a tall, gaunt man stood looking out over the city. Behind him men in army uniforms hurried about the room. This man, too, was thinking about the care of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin. A small smile played across his emaciated face.

Even as he smiled, his office door opened and a powerful, swarthy man entered. This newcomer wore the uniform of a full general of the Venezuelan army. The gaunt man turned smartly from the window and bowed deferentially to the general.

"You have news, General Hoyos?" the gaunt man asked.

"I do. They are on their way, two of them. They assure me that no one else knows about our problem," General Hoyos said. The defense minister showed more worry on his face than his voice would have indicated.

"I wonder if we are being wise," General Hoyos went on. "To keep it so secret. This U.N.C.L.E. organization, can they handle it all alone?"

"With our help, sir, they can." The tall man smiled. "After all, Rudolfo, they will not be alone. I will personally lead the Sixteenth Regiment to help them."

"A good regiment, the Sixteenth," the defense minister agreed.

"You trained them yourself, Rudolfo," the gaunt man said.

"With your aid, Miguel," General Hoyos said.

"We make a good team, General," the gaunt man said.

Hoyos looked at him shrewdly. "I wonder why you have been content to remain behind me all these years, Miguel?"

"Because I am a soldier to serve," the gaunt man said with a smile.

General Hoyos nodded. Then he turned and strode to the first telephone. He barked an order. "Colonel Montoya? This is General Hoyos, yes. You will prepare the Sixteenth Regiment for immediate duty, yes. Immediate. You will report at once to General Valera in his office."

The defense minister hung up. "The rest is up to you, Miguel. I know you will not fail."

And the defense minister was gone. The tall man walked slowly out into the full light. He wore the uniform of a major general. He smiled his thin smile.

"Yes, the rest is up to me, Rudolfo Hoyos," he said in a soft voice. "And the time has come. I will not be behind you much longer, dear Rudolfo. I will

certainly not fail."

And Major General Miguel Valera began to laugh a soundless laugh as he turned and walked into a private office. He locked the door behind him and picked up a telephone.

"Bring Dr. Guerre to the telephone," he barked.

FOUR

THE RAVEN-HAIRED young girl looked up from her desk at the Defense Ministry. She saw a small, slender, blond young man smiling down at her. She touched her hand to her black hair, and her full red lips were moist. She wondered if this young man was married. His clothes looked American—a fine suit and white shirt, and the thick horn-rimmed glasses suited his lean face.

"Yes, *Senor*?" she said.

His clothes were indeed American, and the girl liked Americans. They were rich and very important, at least under the present regime. She believed in the present regime, whatever regime it happened to be at any moment.

"Max Derwent to see General Valera," the young man said in perfect Spanish.

The young girl frowned for an instant. Then she brightened again. He spoke fine Spanish, true, but there was an accent. He was not of her country, and that pleased her. She had plans to see the world, become rich. Yet she was puzzled. The young man wore American clothes, was clearly of the North with his fine blond hair, and yet his accent in his perfect Spanish was not quite American. Perhaps an Englishman? That was not so good, but not too bad.

"Of course, *Senor* Derwent," she said. "And your business?"

"Uniforms, I sell uniforms," the young man said.

The girl nodded, smiled, and moistened her lips again. Illya looked at her fine full lips, red and soft. He looked at her raven-dark hair, and at the figure. What he could see made him glad that Napoleon was not here. He did not have Napoleon's way with women. Still, after this was over, perhaps he could try with this girl.

"General Valera will see you," the girl said.

Illya frowned at himself. The mind on the job, that was his code. He had not left his own country, joined U.N.C.L.E., to meet pretty young girls. A man had his work, his studies, the millions of facts about his world he did not know

but wanted to know. Self-discipline and control, that was what Zen had taught him, and that was how he lived. Still, a pretty girl—

"Thank you," Illya said.

The supposed Max Derwent entered the office of Major General Miguel Valera, assistant to the defense minister. He carried his small suitcase that, supposedly, contained samples of military uniform cloth, and approached the smiling Valera. The general stood up to greet him. Illya saw a tall, gaunt man.

"Ah, Mr. Derwent," Valera said. "Or perhaps I should say Mr. Kuryakin."

"You can say that if the walls don't have ears," Illya said.

Valera laughed. "I assure you, Mr. Kuryakin, my office is not, how do you say, bugged. Not that such is not done here, but the penalty is rather severe, and, anyway, I check carefully each day."

"It must be a difficult way to live," Illya said dryly.

"Alas, ambition and the desire to serve have their penalties in my poor country," Valera said. "We do not have your, shall we say, orderly minds. But then, I forget you are a Russian. Still, the Russians, too, have orderly

minds." Illya watched the gaunt general. Valera seemed to be talking a great deal, but that could be just the Latin temperament, as Valera was implying. Valera smiled and waved Illya to a seat.

"General Hoyos has, as you say, filled me in on all this. A terrible affair," Valera said. "I imagine you are anxious to start, as I am myself. We have the Sixteenth Regiment standing by in the area, but out of sight, eh? But first, please, your credentials."

Illya Kuryakin handed over his identification. His quizzical eyes were lowered beneath his brow. He watched Valera. The general read the credentials. Illya smiled.

"You're too modest," Illya said innocently. "I understand this was entirely your idea, not General Hoyos's."

"We work as a team," Valera said crisply. He handed back the credentials. "Now, I am ready if you are. Mr. Solo is waiting, I hope; we have little time to lose."

"Not with those nuclear planes running loose, I agree. You have accounted for all of them?" Illya said quickly.

Valera nodded. "Yes, all six. They were seen to land."

"Excellent," Illya said. "It is important that we get them all."

He talked to cover the slip. But inside he was alert. It was always the same thing that tripped up a liar—too much knowledge. Valera had slipped—not because he knew too little, but because he knew too much. All six, the general had said, but there had been only one in the picture, and Hoyos had not mentioned six to Waverly.

Illya smiled, but his eyes darted around, alert. He was sure that if six had been seen, Hoyos would have mentioned that important fact. No, Valera had said six planes because Valera knew there were six. Only two groups of people knew that there had been six nuclear planes in New Mexico—U.N.C.L.E. and Thrush!!

Valera smiled. "We really better have Mr. Solo join us now, don't you think?"

"Of course," Illya said. "I'll call the hotel. He'll be ready by now, I'm sure."

"Time is of the essence, Mr. Kuryakin," Valera said.

"Of course," Illya said. He picked up the telephone on Valera's desk.

"Hotel Splendide? Mr. Solo, please. Room four-sixteen."

Illya waited, smiling at Valera. The general smiled back, and then busied himself over papers on his desk.

"Napoleon?" Illya said as Solo came on the line. "Yes, Illya here. I am with General Valera. Yes, all is correct, naturally. The general is anxious to get started. Will you meet us—"

Illya stopped and looked at Valera. The general stood behind his desk.

"At my car out in front. A grey Bentley touring car. He can't mistake it. My general's license plate is on it. Please urge speed; this is an urgent affair."

Illya spoke into the telephone. "Out in front of the Defense Ministry. Valera's car is a grey Bentley touring car with his license on it. And, Napoleon, hurry please." As Illya put down the instrument he pretended to let it slip to the desk. He picked it up again and replaced it in its cradle. But he had heard the faint but tell-tale click on the line—someone had been listening to his call. He grinned at General Valera.

"We won't have to wait long, General," Illya said. "But, you know, I wonder if I shouldn't meet General Hoyos after all?"

"Hoyos?" Valera said. "But we agreed that it was imperative to keep the government officially out of this? I can pass all but unseen, but General Hoyos could not."

Illya still smiled. "Of course, you're right. How are your roses growing?"

Valera stood immobile behind his desk. "Roses?"

"You do grow them?" Illya said.

Valera smiled. "Ah, yes. That would be in my dossier at U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, wouldn't it?"

Illya watched the general quizzically. "You admit it?"

Valera shrugged. "That I am Council Member 'L'? Why not? You must know, but—"

The U.N.C.L.E. special appeared in Illya's hand as if by magic. It was aimed at Valera. The general did not move.

"I think we will talk to General Hoyos," Illya said.

Valera laughed. "No, I think not."

"This is no joke, Valera," Illya said. "I have you—"

Illya said no more. Hands grabbed him from behind. His gun was knocked to the floor by a paralyzing blow. Before he could utter a sound, he was held as firmly as a trussed goose by three men who had crept up behind him silently. Valera bent and picked up the pistol. The general was smiling.

"It was the six nuclear-craft, wasn't it?" Valera said. "Yes, I realized that was a slip the instant I said it. I was not sure you had caught it, but I do not underestimate an opponent. That is why I am where I am, and why I will go farther."

Illya nodded, understandingly. "You alerted your men with some phrase in the message you gave me for Napoleon."

"You see, you are intelligent. Yes, the phrase 'an urgent affair' is my warning signal," Valera said, and the general motioned to his men. "Take him into the next office. We must wait until they bring Solo to me. It was very good of you to tell me just where to find Solo, Mr. Kuryakin. We will not have to wait long."

Valera laughed again. But this time, for once, the general was wrong.

FIVE

IN THE ROOM in the Hotel Splendide, Napoleon Solo put down the telephone receiver and rubbed his chin. So it was a trap, as they had suspected it might be. The utter secrecy, the dealing with Valera instead of General Hoyos, had had a false ring to it. Nothing the two agents could put their finger on, but a little odd. Everything had been too carefully arranged to send them straight to this country and General Valera.

Now Illya had confirmed their suspicions. The phrase "All is correct, naturally" was the signal that all was far from correct. If it had been correct, Illya would have said, "All is right," and not added the word, naturally. The call, then, was Valera's way of locating him. They would be knocking on the door in minutes.

Solo moved rapidly. He needed time now. It would not be enough to simply escape, to not be here when they came. If he did only that, they would immediately alert Valera, and Solo needed time. It was possible that Illya would escape, but he had to assume that Illya would not escape the trap.

He went to work. There was no telling how many of them there would be, and he would have to get them all and fast. He took the miniature tape recorder from his briefcase and set it in the bedroom of the suite. Across the door into bedroom, low near the floor, he set a trip wire attached to small gas bombs on either side.

This done, he took his briefcase and his U.N.C.L.E. special and went out into the corridor. He crossed the corridor to the room across the hall, an empty room rented by Illya for just such a purpose. Inside this room he stood just behind the door, with the door open a crack, and the door of his suite across the hall clearly visible.

In his pocket his left hand rested on the remote control of the tape recorder.

He was just fast enough.

The four men came down the1 corridor from the elevator—four soldiers with the insignia of the Defense Ministry staff. They were armed and they moved swiftly and with expert silence. They stopped in front of the door to 416. Solo clicked on the tape recorder with his remote control.

The four men cautiously opened the door to 416. Napoleon Solo smiled as his own voice came to him from the bedroom, his own voice talking to Waverly in New York. The four soldiers nodded to each other and entered the suite. Solo waited.

There was a short silence.

Then he heard a door kicked in, two sharp explosions low and muffled, and sudden screams.

Men were choking.

Solo stepped out into the corridor.

One man came running from the door of room 416. Solo shot him with a single sleep-dart. The man collapsed in the corridor. Solo grasped the heels of the man and dragged him into the suite. Inside he saw the other three men sprawled in the doorway to the bedroom. He dragged them all into the bedroom, closed and locked the bedroom door, and again left the suite.

He hung the *Do Not Disturb* sign on the corridor door, and walked away, grinning.

The whole incident had taken less than two minutes. The four soldiers would sleep for at least five hours. Solo went down the stairs and out into the street in front of the hotel. He saw the military car. The driver was reading a newspaper. Solo stepped into the rear seat and closed the door. His U.N.C.L.E. special rested with the muzzle against the driver's neck.

"The Defense Ministry, and very fast."

The driver said nothing, but put the car into gear and drove off. Five minutes later they pulled up a block from the Defense Ministry. Solo reached out and gently squeezed the driver's neck. The driver collapsed where he sat. Solo pulled the man into the back seat, bound and gagged him, and locked the car.

Moments later he stood in front of the Ministry of Defense. The only men in sight were two bored guards on the entrance. Solo saw General Valera's grey Bentley.

Casually, Solo walked past the grey touring car. As he reached the rear bumper he appeared to drop his briefcase. He bent to pick it up and then walked on and away around the nearest corner.

The soldiers on guard had seen nothing, but in the instant of bending Solo had placed a tiny vial beneath the rear bumper of the grey Bentley.

Then he returned to the military car, got in, and sat waiting where he could see the grey Bentley.

* * *

UPSTAIRS, in the office of General Valera, the general himself paced and looked at his watch. A half an hour had passed and there was no Solo and no report from his men. Valera pressed a button. Three armed guards brought Illya in from the next office.

"So," Valera said, "you warned him. I should have guessed. However, it will do you no good. He will be found, and you will not be found. Prepare him!"

Two guards held Illya's arms. The third stood in front of him with a hypodermic needle filled with a pale blue fluid. The third guard bared Illya's arm and injected the fluid. Valera smiled.

"A small precaution," Valera said,

Illya tried to answer, but nothing happened. He tried again. He could not speak.

"You have seen the effects of *metabala-G*, I believe?" Valera said. "That is one of the wonders of science. Dr. Guerre made the drug to counteract the effects of excessive speed on a human. It proved to have an interesting side-effect that may be of even greater use, eh? Now, even if you escape or your friend finds you, you will be able to tell him nothing!"

And Valera laughed aloud, as if mocking Illya with the sound of his voice. Then he went to the telephone and ordered Solo located and captured if possible, killed if necessary.

"Come," the gaunt general said. "We have wasted enough time. Your friend will be found, and if he isn't he will not escape the city anyway. You wanted to find Project Condor, and now you will!"

Valera led the way from his office down a secret stairway where no one could see him, or his men, or his prisoner. In the street he strode straight to his grey Bentley. Moments later the car drove away.

Some five minutes after that the stolen military car, with Solo at the wheel, drove after the Bentley. Solo wore a pair of strange goggles. On the road he saw, through the goggles, the trail of small red dots that dropped from the vial he had planted. The vial would drip for twenty-four hours, could not be erased in any way, and could be seen only through the special goggles.

Sixteen hours later, just as dawn was breaking over the coast and the thick jungle-like swamps, Solo followed the tell-tale trail of the Bentley to the edge of a narrow stretch of open water. He saw where a ferry-boat had picked up the car and carried it across into what looked a like an island in the coastal swamps.

He left his car, took his briefcase and weapons, and eased into the water. He swam softly in the still dark morning. He crawled cautiously out on the other side. The trail of his vial led off along a narrow dirt road. He followed it silently.

The sun was up when he reached the end of the trail. The grey Bentley stood in front of a strange-looking windowless concrete building.

Solo could guess what the building was—an immense atomic reactor pile.

But it was another odd-shaped building that caught his eye. He crept through the jungle-like growth to this building.

Its size was staggering to the mind, at least as wide as a regulation football field.

It was shaped like the dome of an observatory, like a giant beehive. Above it was heavy camouflage. Solo studied it and saw a ring of windows at ground level. Up close it was so large it faded away out of sight on either side as it curved in its circle. He reached a window and looked in. What he saw was more staggering than the size of the giant building.

He saw a tall metal column. It towered high into the dome, and seemed to stand in a deep hole in the ground.

The column itself was at least a hundred feet wide and over a hundred feet high.

Attached to the column half way up he saw the six black nuclear aircraft with their stubby wings.

For a long minute he could not believe what he was seeing. Men climbed ladders and went in and out of the giant column. He looked at where it entered the earth and faded away below.

He knew what he was seeing, but he did not want to believe it, in all its horror.

The column was the payload end of the largest rocket he had ever seen.

A rocket that could only lift off under more concentrated power than he had ever heard could be developed.

And the payload end was only one possible thing—a space station intended to orbit. *A space station that carried six deadly nuclear aircraft.*

A space station that could dominate the Earth.

Project Condor!

ACT IV

FOR WANT OF A NAIL

THE FOUR SOLDIERS of the 16th Regiment rode in the jeep through the swamp, driving carefully on the dirt road. A scouting party, they watched the jungle and narrow waterways carefully. It was the corporal himself who saw the man come out of the brush.

"Look there!" the corporal cried in Spanish.

The man who came out of the bush was covered in mud from head to foot, his clothes dripping. He waved frantically at the soldiers of the 16th Regiment. The soldiers slowed and kept their weapons pointed at him.

"You will remain completely motionless, *Senor*," the corporal said in Spanish. And to his men, "Search him."

"Listen, my name is Napoleon Solo. I have to see your commander immediately!" Solo said.

After his one long look at the gigantic rocket with its deadly space station, Solo had managed to retrace his steps and swim back to the mainland. But his stolen car had been gone, and he had seen the tracks of many men wearing boots. He was sure that no Thrush men had left the swamp island, and realized that the Government had undoubtedly sent men, probably under the command of General Valera. Only Valera was on the island, not with the soldiers.

He had begun to look for the soldiers.

He searched as quickly as he could in the trackless jungle swamps—there was no telling just when the space station would be launched. Valera had come here, so it was probably soon. Now, with the soldiers watching him suspiciously, he tried to convince them of the urgency.

"It's vitally important," Solo said in Spanish.

The corporal eyed him suspiciously. "You are not of our country, *Senor*?"

"No, I'm an American: I'm working with General Hoyos!" Solo said.

"North Americano?" the corporal said, in English now.

One of the soldiers who had searched Solo showed the U.N.C.L.E. special and the briefcase filled with strange-looking objects and weapons to the corporal. The corporal looked at Solo's equipment.

"So? A Yankee who carries a pistol and is found walking alone in a swamp? I think the commander, he will also want to see you, *Senor*."

Ten minutes later Solo stood before a short, dark man in the uniform of a full colonel. The colonel, one Colonel Montoya, Commander of the 16th Regiment, had examined his briefcase and pistol.

"You say this is an U.N.C.L.E. weapon, that the case is the same, and that you are named Napoleon Solo, an agent for that organization?"

"Yes, Colonel, and can we hurry? They have a space station they are going to launch!" Solo explained.

"A space station? From the island in the swamp?" Montoya said. "It is quite a story, Mr. Solo, if that is indeed your true name."

"You have my credentials!" Solo snapped. "Colonel, I have friends, prisoners on that island. I have to get in there and help them! I came out to give General Hoyos a chance to get here and stop the launch."

Colonel Montoya sat down on his camp stool inside the field tent. "Mr. Solo, again if that is truly your name," Montoya said. "Do you take me for a

fool? You think I do not know that my men are here for some important project? Only you continue to talk about General Hoyos, when it is General Valera who commands this mission. If you were what you say you are, would you not know that? Would you not ask for General Valera?"

Solo studied the short, dark colonel. The soldier had the ring of truth in his voice, and yet? Thrush men were well trained. If Valera was a Thrush man, then why not Montoya? Only Solo had a hunch. In a country like this, men protected themselves. With Valera in command, General Hoyos would probably have assigned a second in command loyal to himself, Hoyos. Anyway, he had to take the chance.

"Because I am pretty sure that General Valera is the leader on the other side," Solo said. "I think General Valera is the man in charge of Project Condor. He has taken my partner prisoner, and has him on that island in the swamp."

Montoya slowly twirled his dark mustache. "General Valera, you say?"

The dark colonel stared hard at Solo. Montoya did not leap to Valera's defense, did not fly into a rage of outraged honor. Instead the colonel seemed to be thinking, considering, watching Solo very carefully.

"You tell me that General Valera is actually a traitor?"

"I think he is a top leader of Thrush. You've heard of Thrush?"

Montoya nodded slowly. "I have heard of this Thrush."

"Then you know how dangerous this affair is. You have to get through to General Hoyos," Solo said. "You can check up on why Valera isn't here where he should be!"

A tall, gaunt figure loomed in the entrance to the field tent. The cadaverous face stared at Solo and then at Colonel Montoya. Montoya had leaped to his feet at the sight of the tall man.

"But he is here, and if you have anything to ask, ask Valera himself!"

General Miguel Valera stood in the doorway flanked by four of his special staff. They were all armed. Solo looked at the armed men, and at Montoya.

"Who is this man, Colonel Montoya?" General Valera asked.

"He claims to be one Napoleon Solo of an organization named The United Network Command For Law and Enforcement."

Valera snorted. "A spy! Shoot him!"

"His credentials seem genuine," Montoya said.

"Forged, my dear Montoya. Anyone can forge a set of U.N.C.L.E. credentials, especially a Thrush agent," Valera said.

"He claims that you are a Thrush leader, General," Montoya said.

"And do you believe him, Colonel Montoya?" Valera snapped.

"Of course not, but, with your permission, his credentials should be checked," Montoya said.

"Shoot him! I, Valera, take responsibility!"

Montoya stared straight ahead. "With your permission, my General, you are not empowered to shoot without a trial."

"Empowered? Fool, I command in the field! That is all the power I need, you know that," Valera snapped.

"With your permission, such power was removed by General Hoyos when he assumed the Defense post. Article Twelve of the new Military Code."

"The devil with Article Twelve," Valera snapped. "But if it bothers you, Colonel, I will simply take your prisoner off your hands. You agree I am 'empowered' to do that much?"

"Yes, General," Montoya said "But, with your permission, I think the matter should be taken to General Hoyos. This man has, of course, made some

mistake about you, but he may well be who he claims to be, and—"

Valera stared at Montoya. The eyes of the gaunt general were grim and careful.

"I see," Valera broke in. "General Hoyos, eh? And if I take your prisoner, you will, of course, immediately inform General Hoyos of that fact?"

"Of course. It would be my clear duty." Montoya said.

Valera nodded. A pistol seemed to appear in his thin hand. There was a sharp, soft cracking sound. Montoya seemed to leap backwards and sprawl out flat on the ground. Valera held his silenced pistol and looked down at the dead man. Then he holstered the pistol.

"Come," Valera said to his men. "Bring Solo."

Outside, Valera called over two of the soldiers of Headquarters Company of the 16th Regiment. The soldiers stood at rigid attention.

"Colonel Montoya does not wish to be disturbed," Valera said crisply. "Is that clear? I will return later, see that no one bothers the colonel at his work."

"Yes, General," the soldiers said in unison.

"Very good," Valera said. And to his men, "Bring the prisoner." Solo was marched to the grey Bentley and pushed inside. The touring car drove off. Once out of sight of the soldiers of the Sixteenth Regiment, the grey car turned toward the island in the swamp where the space station waited to be launched. Valera smiled.

"So, Mr. Solo, now we have you all."

"They'll find Montoya," Solo said.

"Of course. But what will they learn from a dead man?"

Valera began to laugh aloud.

TWO

SOLO STOOD in the dark night. The four guards watching him. Valera faced an angry Dr. Guerre. The cherubic little man still looked like some rotund pixie despite his anger.

"Kill them or throw him into the pit with the others, Council Member," Guerre said. "We have wasted too much time on them as it is. We will have to launch at dawn; they will find Montoya! Did you have to kill him? Stupid!"

"They will learn nothing from a dead man," Valera snapped. "And may I remind you who is in charge here?"

"You may remind me forever," Guerre roared, "but it is my project! I have waited too long to let you ruin it. Do you think I need a computer to tell me that Waverly will put two and two together once Hoyos informs him of Montoya's death? Those soldiers saw you in that tent, you fool! They will talk to anyone."

Valera turned purple with anger. "How dare you call—"

"Oh shut up! The space station goes at dawn; we cannot risk discovery! When will you Thrush fools learn that Waverly is as good or better than your damned computer!? Kill them now, if you have to. That is about what you are good for, to kill gadflies!"

Valera boiled with rage. "You take care of your project, Dr. Guerre; leave U.N.C.L.E. to me. You did not do very well with them in New Mexico. I think they are too valuable to kill. Once Condor is in orbit, we will still need other information. Condor alone will not bring us the world."

"Then throw this one into the pit with the others and be damned!" Guerre raged. "I have work!"

The fat little man turned and waddled off into the night. Valera, still in a rage, barked an order. The four men hustled Solo to the edge of a yawning pit. Valera turned and strode off after Guerre, his eyes blazing with rage against the fat Doctor. The four men bound Solo's hands, looped a rope under his arms, and lowered him into the pit.

On the bottom Solo lay in soft dirt. He felt the rope jerk; then it was loose and going up. He saw the faint faces of the four soldiers far- off above. The pit was at least thirty feet deep. Solo lay there struggling in his bonds. Then he heard a noise. The face of Illya Kuryakin peered down at him. The blond agent grinned and went to work on his ropes.

A few moments later Solo sat up, free. He smiled at Illya.

"At least we can play cards, if we had any cards," Solo said.

Illya shook his head.

"You don't feel like talking?" Solo said.

Illya shook his head again, pointed to his mouth. Solo stared. Illya pointed to his mouth, shook his head, shrugged.

"You can't talk?" Solo said. "They used that drug on you?"

Illya nodded, pointed off into the dark at the bottom of the pit. Solo looked and saw a figure. The figure moved, sat up. It was Penny Parsons. At least the girl was still alive, but there was fear in her eyes.

"Did they drug her too?" Solo asked.

Illya nodded. The girl just stared as if in a trance. Solo looked around.

"At least they left us our clothes again. Shoes, too, this time," Solo said.

Illya held out his flat suitcase. Then the blond agent pointed up, and at the walls, and shrugged, tossed the case away. Solo watched Illya, and then walked and touched the walls of the pit. Soft dirt everywhere.

There was no hold, nothing but dirt towering thirty feet up.

Solo nodded. "I see what you mean. Our weapons are all designed for the twentieth century; they're useless against a pit of simple dirt. So they didn't bother to take them."

Illya nodded.

"We can cut through metal, wood, concrete. We can blow up doors and locks. But what do you do against dirt?"

Illya shrugged. Solo laughed.

"Well, nothing is all bad," Solo said. "It's the first time I've ever seen you speechless."

Illya glared. Solo laughed again. The girl, Penny Parsons, began to cry. Solo looked around.

"There must be some way out," Solo said.

Illya nodded and pointed off to the left. Solo saw a hole in the side of the pit. A large hole like a passage that seemed to lead downward. Solo studied it and nodded.

"This pit is connected to something else," Solo said. "Do you know where it leads?"

Illya nodded, and shrugged.

"Well, we have to try something. Maybe you missed a way out. Let's go."

Illya nodded again. The two agents took hold of Penny Parsons and led the girl to the large hole. They crawled into the hole with Solo leading.

The passage led downward at a sharp angle. It seemed to go on and on. But at last Solo saw light ahead. They emerged in an enormous underground chamber. Solo looked around. Many other holes led off all around the circular chamber. Illya pointed up.

Solo looked up and saw the gigantic base of the space station launching rocket. The rocket engines protruded from the base, ten of the largest engine cones he had ever seen. And they were different in appearance. Solo looked at Illya.

"Nuclear engines?" Solo said.

Illya nodded.

"This is the blast chamber. The passages to the pits are to give escape for the exhaust gases when it lifts off," Solo said.

Illya nodded. The small Russian indicated a sudden explosion, gas spreading out and into the exhaust holes, and filling the pits beyond. Then Illya indicated the end, finished. Solo nodded.

"The gases will finish us. Is there a way out of this chamber, maybe up along the rocket?" Solo asked.

Illya indicated that they could try. Solo looked around and saw the steel ladder that led up the side of the chamber to a platform on a level with the engine above. He walked to the ladder and climbed up to the stage. Illya came up behind him. On the platform the two agents looked at the rocket, and then upward.

There was no way up the sheer steel sides of the rocket pit. Solo shrugged and leaned out. He reached the tail section of the rocket itself and pulled himself up. Illya walked around and did the same on the other side. Slowly, painfully, both men pulled themselves up over the gigantic tail section.

Solo reached the end of the tail section. Above him the monster rocket stretched round and smooth. There was nothing more to hold on to and the steel-sided pit faded away above. Solo tried, but it was no use. He slid, slipped, and fell back to the tail section. There was no way up.

On the platform he waited. Illya appeared. Obviously the small Russian had had no better luck. The two men descended the ladder and rejoined Penny Parsons on the bottom. The deadly engines towered above them. Solo

looked at the hundreds of holes all around to allow the ignition gases to escape.

"Well, we might as well see if they lead anywhere better than our original pit," Solo said.

Illya shrugged and the girl began to cry again. Solo patted her heaving shoulders.

"We might find something," Solo said.

But they did not.

They searched all the exhaust passages, but found nothing but more pits exactly like the one they had been dropped into. They split up and searched. There was nothing.

Dawn light tinged the open space above the pits. A hum had begun somewhere. The rocket was being readied. Then Illya came out of a side passage and nodded his blond head eagerly. The small Russian picked up his flat suitcase and motioned for Solo and the girl to follow.

The hum of engines warming grew louder.

Solo crawled along the dark passage behind the girl. Illya was up ahead. They emerged into another pit—a pit exactly like all the others they had reached. Solo swore.

"Damn it, Illya, this is—"

Illya pointed up. Solo looked up to where a very faint dawn light showed some kind of object hanging over the pit.

Solo narrowed his eyes and looked at the object. Then he saw what it was—a crane!

Above this pit there was a crane and boom hanging out over the hole itself. A crane intended to lower material into the pit. The cable of the crane dangled tantalizingly over the pit.

If they could somehow manage to reach it.

THREE

ILLYA OPENED his small suitcase and brought out the tiny electronic meter and activator. Solo looked at the tiny instrument designed to activate any electrically-controlled device. Then he looked up at the crane. It was just possible . . .

"If it can range that far," Solo said.

Illya's quizzical eyes smiled, indicated that the range was okay; the question was whether or not the crane was electrically operated and controlled.

"What have we got to lose?" Solo said.

Illya set the controls of the tiny actuator and aimed it upward. There was a silence.

Illya increased the power in the actuator.

Nothing happened.

The two agents looked at each other. Somewhere the hum of the nuclear engines pre-heating grew louder.

Illya slowly changed the direction of the electronic signal from the actuator, revolving the instrument in his hands.

Above an engine coughed, missed, struggled—and went on.

The crane began to vibrate. The sound was that of a gasoline engine, started by an electric spark.

"Now, are the controls electric?" Solo said. "Give it the gun, my Russian optimist."

Illya twisted the control dial on the actuator. There was a grinding of gears above, a whirring of a drum, and the cable began to move upward.

"Quick!" Solo cried. "If it reaches the top it could jam!"

Illya reversed the controls. There was a loud grinding of gears. The crane boom above shuddered as the gears reversed. The whole machine above shook, hesitated.

At the bottom of the pit, Solo and Illya watched.

Illya increased the power on the actuator the fraction of a turn. The crane shook—and the cable started down. It came down fast now. When it reached the bottom Illya stopped it with a flick of the control. There was a large cargo sling at the end.

Solo went first, his foot in the stirrup of the cargo sling, holding to the cable, riding up. He crouched and peered out as he was raised clear of the edge. There was no one near.

Penny Parsons came up next, then Illya.

In the faint light of dawn a thick mist rose from the swamp all around the island. Vague figures moved in the mist far off. Solo and Illya kept the girl between them as they advanced warily, unable to see more than twenty feet.

The mist that hid their enemies from them, hid them from their enemies. Men passed close to them in the thick white mist and did not even glance at them. The base was a beehive of activity. None of the men who passed them were armed until, suddenly they came out into an open space in front of a thick- walled concrete building.

The mist has thinned. It still hung heavy over the water of the swamp that surrounded the island, but here it had thinned. Two armed men stood in front of the main doorway into the building. Illya nodded to Solo. The two

agents warned Penny Parsons to stay where she was, and vanished into the swirling mist.

They appeared from either side at the same instant, each creeping up close along the wall behind one of the two guards. Both guards fell without a sound, chopped across the neck. Solo and Illya scooped up t heir weapons, motioned to Penny to come ahead, and the three of them went into the building.

Solo led the way down broad corridors that were strangely deserted. Illya pointed to an open door far down a wide main corridor. There was light in the doorway. The three approached the doorway carefully. Solo peered around the corner, his Thrush rifle ready.

He saw a large office. There was a desk, leather chairs, all the appointments of the office of some high executive—and a large computer! A door stood open to the left. Even as Solo watched, the computer began to operate, flashing lights and the whirring of a thousand tiny electronic circuits.

Solo looked at Illya. The blond agent came to the door and looked in.

"The Ultimate Computer?" Solo said, watching the awesome machine blinking and whirring.

Illya shook his head. No. With his mobile hands the Russian indicated that this was a smaller copy, a field model of the heart of Thrush operations, but worth destroying. The two agents stepped into the room.

As a man came through the open door to the left.

General Miguel Valera froze as he saw them. His hand moved to his holster. Illya motioned with his stolen Thrush rifle. Valera hesitated, seemed to glance for an instant behind him, then shrugged and moved his hand away from his weapon. The gaunt Thrush council member walked casually into the center of the room.

"So, again you surprise us. Someday, perhaps, we will learn not to underestimate the resourcefulness of U.N.C.L.E. agents. Or perhaps it is

just you two, and, of course, Waverly. Guerre was right; I should have killed you. Now, of course, you will kill me."

Solo smiled. "Not necessarily; we need information, too. Where is Dr. Guerre?"

Valera shrugged. "Alas, I do not know. Preparing the launch, I imagine. I suggest we all leave here very soon. You have noted, I trust, the absence of personnel in this building?"

"What does that mean?" Solo said.

Valera looked at Illya and Penny Parsons. The gaunt Thrush leader grinned. "I see your friends are still speechless. Too bad."

"What do you mean by the absence of personnel?" Solo said again.

Illya suddenly touched Solo's arm. The small blond agent made motions to indicate a rocket flight and an explosion. Valera watched, nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Kuryakin understands. You see, Solo, the launch will go off any moment, and this building will not be safe. All our men are in their shelters. I think you would do wise to give yourselves up to me and allow me to lead you to shelter."

The tall, gaunt Valera was a man of cool nerve. In the face of two rifles trained on his heart he was making his threat, his bid to reserve the situation. But Illya shook his head, pointed to the sky and then the ground. Solo nodded.

"Yes," Solo said. "I think, General, it would be better for you to lead us to the control room so we can stop the launching. You must know—"

Solo sensed, rather than heard, the movement behind him. He whirled. Illya whirled. There was a single shot and Illya fell, clutching his shoulder.

Maxine Trent stood in the doorway, her pistol in her hand.

"Drop it, Napoleon," the beautiful agent said.

Solo hesitated.

"Come, come, Napoleon. You must know that this is it. I will really have to kill you this time. General, take his weapon!"

The general stepped forward. Solo raised his rifle. Maxine smiled viciously and swung the tiny muzzle of her pistol down to point straight at Solo's heart. He knew that she would beat him.

But she did not. She had forgotten Penny Parsons.

The lab girl, against the wall and out of Maxine's sight, jumped forward. Maxine, her eyes concentrated on Solo, her mind already enjoying this moment when she would at last kill Napoleon Solo, did not see Penny until too late. The lab girl struck her with the full force of her body. Maxine's shot went wild into the ceiling.

The pistol skidded away across the floor. Solo leaped after it. Maxine whirled, clawed at Penny Parsons. The lab girl, in a fury of rage at all that had been done to her, attacked in silence and Maxine sprawled on the floor, her skirt flying up above her beautiful legs. Solo dived for the pistol.

Valera reached the pistol first, grabbed it, dropped to one knee, raised the small gun and aimed straight at the onrushing Solo. There was a shot, a second shot, and Valera fell over backwards.

Solo reached the pistol and picked it up. He whirled to see Illya lying prone on the floor, his rifle still pointing at General Valera.

Solo bent over Valera. The General opened his eyes.

"Damn you!" Valera whispered. "Gone—all gone. Damn you . . . I would have—ruled . . . the . . . world!" And then Valera smiled once more. "But . . . too . . . late . . . for . . . you . . . too! I stopped . . . you! The . . . door ... too late . . . "

Valera fell back. Dead.

Illya, his left arm dangling, struggled to his feet. Solo faced around to cover Maxine Trent. Penny Parsons sat dazed on the floor, and Maxine was gone. Illya limped across the room to the door that stood open in the left wall of the large office. Solo went to stand with the Russian.

They were looking into a small, steel-lined room with walls covered with filing cabinets. Across this room was a wall half glass and half steel, with another room beyond the glass-and-steel wall.

The room behind the glass-and- steel wall was filled with instruments and consoles. Lights blinked all through this second room. On the far side of the second room there was a large window, and through the window the launching area was clearly visible.

They saw the gigantic nose section of the launching rocket through the far window, the space station with its six deadly nuclear aircraft.

The space station and nuclear aircraft were quivering out on the launching pad.

The room behind the glass-and- steel wall was what they had been looking for—the main control room!

And the cherubic face of Dr. Ernesto Guerre smiled at them from inside the control room.

"Valera fooled us!" Solo muttered. "He held us out there in the office while the control room was here all the time!"

Illya raised his stolen Thrush rifle and fired a point-blank burst at the glass-and-steel wall.

The bullets bounced off.

Inside the control room Dr. Guerre laughed, and reached to press a button. A voice suddenly seemed to fill the steel outer room.

"Three hundred and counting down. Two-ninety-nine . . . two- ninety-eight . . . two-ninety-seven . . . two-ninety-six . . . two- ninety-five . . . "

Solo said, "Five minutes. Maybe we have time to blast through that door!"

Illya grabbed his shoulder, pulled him.

"Do we have enough explosive?" Solo asked.

Illya shook his head, pulled Solo.

"But we've got to stop the launch!" Solo insisted.

Illya shook his head again, negative, and turned and ran from the room. Solo went after him. In the large office Illya was helping Penny Parsons to her feet. Solo grabbed him.

"We've got to stop it, Illya!" Solo said.

Illya motioned with his hands, a motion of flight and then diving back to earth. Illya motioned an explosion and laughed. Then the small Russian indicated the need for quick and determined flight.

The counting voice continued. "Two-hundred-sixty . . . two-fifty- nine . . . two-fifty-eight . . . two- fifty-seven . . . two-fifty-six . . . "

Solo had one last look at the grinning and triumphant face of the cherubic Dr. Ernesto Guerre as the fat little man stared at them through the glass-and-steel wall of the control room.

FOUR

THE MIST HAD begun to burn off out in the open beyond the main building. Solo, Illya and Penny Parsons ran across the deserted swamp island toward the narrow stretch of water that separated it from the mainland of the swamp.

There was no one in sight; the entire secret base was deserted. In its launching silo the gigantic space station quivered on the end of the giant rocket.

The three reached the edge of the water and plunged in without an instant of hesitation. They swam across and emerged wet and sliding in the mud on the far side.

They staggered up the bank and into the first line of swamp jungle growth.

Illya Kuryakin looked at his watch and urged them on.

They came out on a dirt road. Voices shouted at them. Six soldiers wearing the insignia of the 16th Regiment covered them. A captain stepped forward.

"Who are you, quick?" the captain snapped in Spanish.

"Agents of U.N.C.L.E., we're working with—" Solo began.

The captain broke in. "You are Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin?" he said in English,

"Yes," Solo said, "but how—"

Illya caught his arm, indicated speed and quick escape. Solo faced the captain.

"We better get away from here fast, Captain."

The captain nodded. Already the earth was shaking as the space station was about to blast off. The captain whistled and a command car appeared.

They all piled in and the driver tore off along the road away from the swamp land.

They drove fast and Illya sat in the rear looking back. The whole land was shaking now as the nuclear engines of the launching rocket began to gain full power.

The command car heaved and lurched on the road as the ground shook. Illya looked at his watch.

They passed other vehicles with soldiers, and the captain waved them all to go to the rear. The soldiers needed no urging, the ground trembling as if in the grip of an earthquake.

There were more and more soldiers now, all wearing the insignia of the 16th Regiment, and all armed in full battle gear.

Suddenly, Illya touched Solo's shoulder and pointed to the direction from which they had come. The earth was shivering madly now.

Solo looked back and saw it.

The space station, with its six black nuclear craft attached, had risen above the swamp, far back.

Half the rocket was visible now, rising slowly, so very slowly.

Solo could not believe, even now, the size of the gigantic launch vehicle. It seemed to fill the horizon. So big it seemed on top of them, although it was many miles away now.

The vehicle climbed so slowly higher, gathering speed.

The tail section appeared.

Then the mighty engines, blasting great sheets of flame that seared the swamp growth beneath them.

Illya gripped Solo's shoulder.

The rocket moved clear of all the vegetation, seemed to hang there in the air, an impossibly giant rocket moving slowly upward, gathering speed.

"It's making it!" Solo cried.

Illya's fingers dug into his shoulder.

Then the monstrous space vehicle seemed to hesitate, falter.

For a long second it hung there, still moving, but somehow leaning.

It seemed to shudder once.

And then it tilted, turned, began to shake like a tall tree in a high wind.

With a final shudder it fell over on its side and crashed back to earth. It fell over so slowly and seemed to float gently back down. Slowly, and then faster, and faster, until it hurtled down sideways and vanished beneath the swamp growth.

A mighty sheet of flame shot skyward.

The flames engulfed the entire island like a giant tidal wave.

Then the shock wave came.

The command car was picked up as if a giant hand and hurled off the road. It landed upright in the swamp, men flung all around.

Napoleon Solo picked himself up out of the mud. Penny Parsons was sitting up, grinning as she looked back to where the swamp island was a mass of flames.

Illya Kuryakin struggled in the muck, holding his wounded shoulder, but grinning as Solo came to help him up.

"All right, my grinning Russian, how did you do it?" Solo said.

Illya reached into his pocket and held up a tiny threaded bolt. The bolt was two inches long, no more than a quarter of an inch wide.

"You took it out of the rocket?" Solo said. "When we climbed up the tail?"

Illya nodded and began to laugh soundlessly.

On the road many soldiers were slowly advancing. Solo and Illya turned to face them. Walking calmly ahead of the soldiers they saw General Hoyos and the tweedy figure of Alexander Waverly. The U.N.C.L.E. Chief was tapping at his pipe, looking annoyed.

* * *

IN THE SMALL, sunny office of Alexander Waverly, the New York skyline outside through the window, Solo, Illya and Penny Parsons sat around the revolving table.

Alexander Waverly sucked on his cold pipe.

"So, I imagine it's good to have your speech back again, Mr.—uh — Kuryakin. And you too, Miss Parsons. No serious ill-effects, I hope?"

"No," Penny said, smiling. "I'm glad I was able to help. I feel I owed it to Mark. He got mixed up in something evil and it killed him. I wanted to try to help make it up."

"And so you did," Waverly said. "General Hoyos informs me that they identified the bodies of Wozlak and Dr. Guerre in what was left of the Thrush installation. Everything was totally destroyed; there will be no space station or nuclear engines. Our various governments are still checking on any other rocket pilots involved in the affair, but the matter is essentially closed."

And Waverly smiled one of his rare smiles toward Illya. "Destroyed for want of a nail, you might say, eh, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya grinned.

"Even a rocket is no better than its smallest part," the small Russian said.

"The removal of that one bolt destroyed the operation of the tail stabilizers," Solo said. "Boom! Was there much nuclear radiation as a result?"

"Very little, actually. Dr. Guerre was a good scientist, if not quite sane. The nuclear bombs in that space station were not armed. The only radiation

came from the rocket engine."

"I was wondering about my friend Maxine?" Solo said. "Were there any survivors on that confounded island?"

"None, Mr. Solo," Waverly said, and began to light his pipe. "However, General Hoyos later learned that you were not the first one off that island. It seems one of his patrols, like the one that picked you up, picked up a lone woman earlier. She fits the description of Maxine Trent, I'm afraid."

"What happened to her?" Penny Parsons asked.

"No one seems to know," Waverly said. "It appears that the entire patrol deserted after capturing her. The various men of that patrol have been found all over Caracas, in varying stages of drunkenness, but Maxine has vanished. The soldiers do not appear to regret their escapade. They say it was worth it."

"That's my Maxine for you," Solo said.

Illya smiled his enigmatic smile. "Some day that woman will finish you, Napoleon."

"I know—but what a way to go," Solo said.

Even Waverly smiled suddenly as Napoleon Solo sighed in the sunny room.